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EYRE METHUEN

EDITORIAL

The ideological operations of documentary film are difficult to disentangle. The codes of documentary tend to produce textual assurances of the naturalness of their representations. The use of the 'real world' as a referent often obscures textual operations more successfully and convincingly than in narrative fictional cinema, which has been the subject of most ideological analysis and criticism to date. Annette Kuhn's analysis of the British war-time documentary *Desert Victory* points to the textual operations which attempt to secure a 'collective' address for the film, positioning spectators in a unified, ideological relationship to the war, the British nation and history. John Ellis sees this film as marking a shift to the elaboration of a corporate collective address — the homogenising use of 'we' as a term to submerge the difference of 'I' — in British cinema and television.

In his article on some recent political documentary films, Noel King reminds us that left documentary can present extremely problematic strategies of representation. He points to a combination of humanism and historicism within the economy of classical narrative which effectively work against the political aims of such films. The purpose of such criticism is to counter the readings such texts propose and in turn suggest strategies to encourage the development of active and critical viewing.

Mick Eaton and Steve Neale analyse the operation of comedy narratives, arguing that comedy can work to defamiliarise codes and conventions and unsettle the spectator. The psychoanalytic nature of the comic response, however, also works to naturalise moments of disruption within the form of

comedy. Attention must be directed, therefore, to the spaces comedy opens up, the discourses it works with and criticises, and the possibilities for engaged social criticism which laughter can provoke.

The development of critical work on film and television representations has in recent years begun to produce a number of films taking theoretical issues as their direct subject matter. Questions of representation, psychoanalysis and feminism are at issue in one such film — *Sigmund Freud's Dora* — which is discussed in this issue by Jane Weinstock, who was involved in its production, and Felicity Oppé who has been working with the exhibition of the film.

Finally we would like to express our thanks to Susan Honeyford who has left *Screen* as a result of the reorganisation at present in progress. Her editorial work has been essential to the success and development of the magazine.

MARK NASH

Notice of the Annual General Meeting of the Society for Education in Film and Television to be held in London on Saturday 30th January 1982 at 2.00 pm.

Nominations are invited for membership of the Executive Committee for 1982 to serve until November 1982. It is intended that beginning in November 1982, Annual General Meetings will be held in November instead of January as at present. Nominations should be proposed and seconded by members of SEFT and should indicate the consent of the nominee. Nominations must be received at the Society's offices, 29 Old Compton St, London W1 no later than Friday November 13th 1981.

RECENT 'POLITICAL' DOCUMENTARY

NOTES ON 'UNION MAIDS' AND 'HARLAN COUNTY USA'

It is unfair in a sense to call a film into question on terms which are not within the film-makers purpose. She [Barbara Kopple] intended to make a . . . I don't know if you would call it a radical . . . but she intended to support the strike and she did it. It's a marvellous film and I support it.—Christian Metz.¹

As soon as you become caught up in the positive aspect of American populism, as soon as you begin touching on the subject matter, commercial and crass as you are, you end up coming out with something fairly decent.—Dan Georgakas.²

These two statements come from two quite different film commentators discussing different kinds of film. Christian Metz is talking about *Harlan County USA* and Dan Georgakas is referring to Hollywood's recent (re) 'discovery' of the working class in films such as *F.I.S.T.*, *Blue Collar* and *Saturday Night Fever*. But I think the statements, from their different perspectives, point to a problem in current film criticism. The problem concerns that familiar formulation: the analysis of political

films versus the political analysis of films. Metz's statement is a reply to the following question from *Discourse* magazine:

Would you accept that a documentary of a strike could be misleading insofar as it assumes that knowledge is unproblematic and on the surface?³

In elaborating his reply Metz invokes the specific instance of *Harlan County USA*, explaining that he and thousands of his fellow Parisians loved the film. There are two points to notice in the position represented by Metz's statement. The first is that, to the strains of 'Solidarity Forever', the ghost of authorial intention rises and is readmitted to the vocabulary of film criticism. Any critical reading of *Harlan County USA* falls silent in the face of an authorial good intention. The

1 'The cinematic apparatus as social institution — An interview with Christian Metz', *Discourse* no 1, 1979, p 30.

2 'Hollywood and the working-class: A discussion', *Socialist Review*, no 46 (vol 9, no 4) July-August, 1979, p 121.

3 *Discourse* no 1, p 30.

8 second thing to notice is the resurfacing of the notion that criticism should be adequate to its object in order to avoid a situation in which there could be a lack of fit between a text and the way it was read: it is the belief that in the case of certain kinds of films, criticism could be, literally, misplaced.

I'm wondering how it is that after a decade of film criticism which in part has offered critiques of authorial readings (the work of Barthes, Heath, Foucault, Willemsen) how it is that if a film is said to be political (as in 'a film about a strike') then it can once again become a repository of author-intended meanings. When this happens, criticism starts to slide away from any interrogation of the ways in which films are appropriated and used, the conditions under which they are distributed and discussed, the specific conjunctures in which they are inserted. For this is the ideological terrain overlooked in Metz's statement. Another way of formulating the position of that argument would be to say something like: if a film has its heart in the right place, if it alerts people to contexts of struggle of which they otherwise might never have been aware, then what right have I to subject that film to the sort of criticism I normally perform? This notion of the function of film theory being compromised by the evidence of the other uses to which a particular film might be put in its circulation, is evident in Ruth McCormick's *Cineaste* review of *Union Maids* where she says she is 'not sure how much analysis or theorising should be done on a film such as this.'⁴ This idea of 'avoiding' analysis is an ideology familiar from that form of literary criticism in which the opposition of 'feeling' and 'theorising' has such force.

In the case of this kind of literary criticism 'theorising' is thought to impede a thoroughly subjective, affective surrender to the experience of an 'encounter' with the text. In the case of McCormick's remarks however, avoidance of theorising seems to be prompted by the belief that the use of *Union Maids* in areas outside a *Cineaste* review could show analysis to be impoverished or impertinent. Analysis would be misplaced.

One way of beginning to reply to this position would be to insist that texts traverse various institutional locations. The fact that a Berkeley woman's group might use *Union Maids* as an organising tool needn't affect other appropriations of the film. This is to say simply that a film such as *Union Maids* is read and re-written in specific, partisan conjunctures: a woman's group is one, an article in *Cineaste* or *Jump Cut* is another, an article in part talking about the film's intersection with those first two areas (film journals) constitutes a third. *Union Maids* is based on Alice and Staughton Lynd's book: *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working Class Organizers*. (Beacon Press, Boston, 1973) Linda Gordon's review of the film for *Jump Cut* contains an accurate enough description of *Union Maids* as:

a collective portrait of three women labour organisers active from the 1930s to the present. . . . The three women were part of a community of working class Chicago socialists. They all came to Chicago in their youth, two from farms and one from New Orleans; all entered industrial jobs in the 1930s and rapidly became rank and file activists, union organisers and socialist leaders.

⁴ Ruth McCormick, 'Union Maids', *Cineaste* vol 8, no 1, Summer 1977, p 51.

In their respective analyses of *Union Maids* Linda Gordon (*Jump Cut*) and Ruth

McCormick (*Cineaste*) saw the film's principal potential as an organising tool for women's and workers' organisations and each urged discussion sessions to accompany screenings of the film. Gordon hoped 'that its showing will often be combined with discussions in which its political implications can be evaluated' while McCormick thought that 'discussions can be built from the ideas presented, however summarily, in the film'. Both the *Cineaste* and *Jump Cut* reviews identified the same set of problems to be addressed in these post-screening discussions. First, Ruth McCormick:

Certainly this kind of discussion could help to clarify the aforementioned lack of emphasis on the role of the CP and the radical left in the struggles depicted. In addition the questions of sexism on the job, and even, as the women mention, in the unions and among leftist men, which exists now as then, could be discussed. Other good discussion points include the issue that Sylvia brings up about working women having to work on the job to return to more work at home, and Stella's statement about the insensitivity she has sometimes encountered in the women's movement from better educated, more privileged women, to the double oppression of poor women.

Similarly Linda Gordon found the film's documentary stance

perhaps most disturbing on the question of leadership and socialist organisation within the CIO. I think that all three women were members of the Communist party. However, the film masks their party membership. The three women speak of themselves as 'radicals', not socialists or communists and say nothing about their organisational connections.

This resulted in a

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failure to discuss the discipline, support, comradeship and strategic consultation these women got from their Party comrades [which] suggests that somehow they became effective leaders magically, through their innate individual talents.

This article tries to identify some problems which go unmentioned in the *Jump Cut* and *Cineaste* reviews. In a sense my comments take up a throw-away remark made by Ruth McCormick ('a film like *Union Maids* very likely owes its popularity to the fact that it appeals to the heart more than the head') and examine the implications it has for readings done of the film in journals such as *Cineaste* and *Jump Cut*. To this extent, these notes could form the basis for a slightly different kind of post-screening discussion from the ones envisaged by Gordon and McCormick. The purpose of such a project will be to try to break the complicity of certain kinds of readings with certain forms of representational techniques so that rather than reading *with* a film or reading *off* from it, reading might go *against* the film. This is a familiar project when applied to Hollywood texts but is less familiar and favoured when applied to leftist texts. It constitutes an attempt to 'interfere' with the circulation of, say, *Union Maids*, *With Babies and Banners*, *Harlan County USA* (perhaps *The Willmar 8*) as left cultural commodities, the start of some counter-archive. It is an attempt to read these documentaries against the grain, to refuse the reading it is the work of their textual systems to secure. In seeking to refuse these films in their current form a step is taken towards thinking what might be put in their place. In Macherey's description:



Union Maids archival footage, interview

*The type of analysis which I propose is precisely to read the ideological contradictions within the devices produced to conceal them, to reconstitute the contradictions from their system of concealment.*⁵

(In the case of *Union Maids* these devices would be the interview format itself and the intersection of discourses of biography, autobiography and popular narrative history.) It is a mode of analysis directed, as Balibar and Macherey have said, at

*the textual devices which present the contradictions of an ideological discourse at the same time as the fiction of its unity and its reconciliation.*⁶

So in the case of these recent documentaries we might notice the way a discourse of morals or ethics suppresses one of politics and the way a discourse of a subject's individual responsibility suppresses any notion of a discourse on the social and linguistic formation of subjects. So in *Union Maids* there is the story of the group's obligation to Katie for her exemplary behaviour ('Four years later Katie, we finally made it up to you'). This is the familiar trope of subjects becoming 'worthy' and *Union Maids* persistently mobilises the device of an individual moral recognition of wrongness, an individual suddenly breaking through blinkeredness and coming to consciousness. In this sense the politics in *Union Maids* might be termed a 'redemptivist politics'; that is to say a politics caught up in political representations which contain moral-ethical elements; a system where questions of individual responsibility are paramount. It is a politics articulated by textual mechanisms which fix the individual subject as responsible, as either

fulfilling or not fulfilling a morally given imperative and this in turn results in a notion of triumph or guilt. It produces a logic for political action based on penance and redemption. This moralistic mode of representation is not confined to the function of the three narrators; the film talks about rent in the same way. Rather than be represented as a particular form of economic calculation, rent is given a moral status, is accorded an oppressive, evil intent within an organising paradigm of the individual versus the institutional. Hence the story of the young policeman seeing through his deforming, repressive, institutional location and going over to the side of the people by passing around the hat ('Here's your goddamn rent'). The point to notice is that this is only one possible representation of rent (one familiar from the melodramas of the silent era) but is the one which best serves the film's humanist-historicist ends. The landlord is constructed (however briefly) as a represser whose function is to block the people's march forward. Rent is represented within a larger system of guilt and redemption, good and bad faith.

The narrative system of *Union Maids* is comprised of a number of sub-forms of narrative, a series of mini-narratives: biography, autobiography and popular narrative history: biography (insofar as the film offers itself as a biographical account of the lives of three radicals), autobiography (in that the interview format allegedly allows these women to tell their own life histories) and popular narrative history (in the form of a

5 Pierre Macherey, Interview with Colin Mercer and Jean Radford, *Red Letters* no 5, p 5.

6 Pierre Macherey, and Etienne Balibar, 'Literature as an ideological form: Some marxist propositions', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol 3, no 1, p 8.

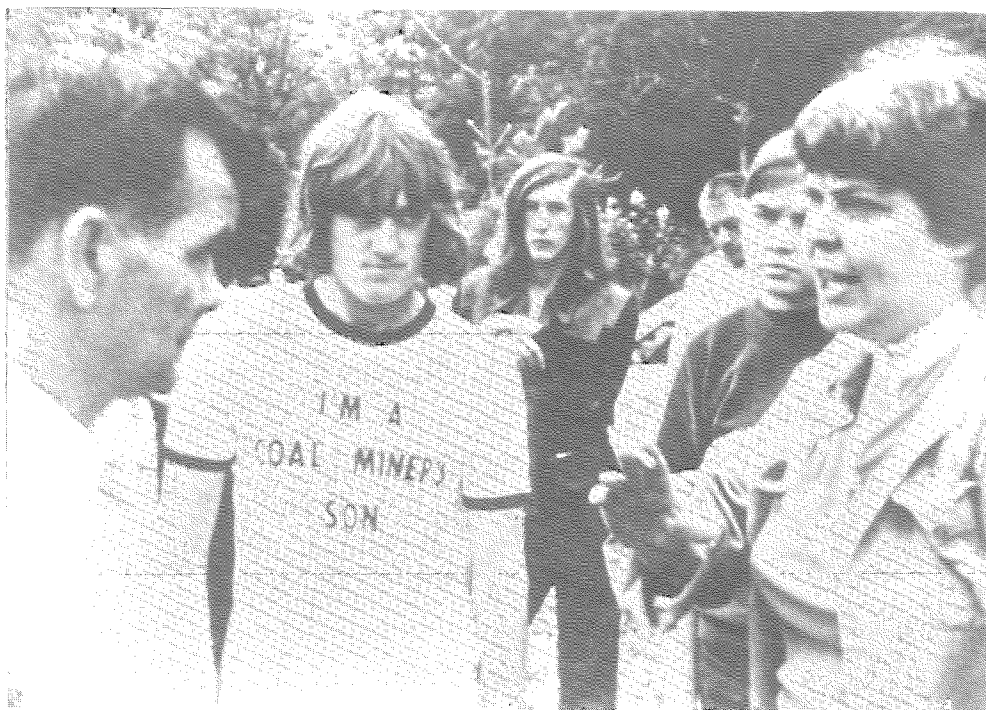


Union Maids

bridging voice-over commentary spoken by the interviewers at those moments where archival footage of 'America in the 30's' is inserted into the narrative). Autobiography draws on practices of reminiscence and anecdote, notions of personal experience, while popular narrative history constructs notions of national destiny. These two trajectories

then merge, the one of individualist life-history, the other of collectivised national movements and in each case the movement is teleological: from a past to a present, from a point of origin or genesis along a casual chain until we reach the present. The present becomes the point from which we can know the past. The effect of employing such a familiar narrative system is that the origin always already contains the end. (In this sense originary narratives always seem diachronic when, in fact, they are static).

This group of recent political documentaries all take the form of a humanist-historicist mode with a universalising populist tendency and surprisingly, fit quite closely Brecht's description of the operations of bourgeois theatre and its habit of emphasising



Harlan County USA

the timelessness of its objects . . . All its incidents are just one enormous cue and this cue is followed by the 'eternal' response, the inevitable, usual, natural, purely human response.⁷

The narrative systems of these recent documentaries are calculated to make a similarly unanimist call to identification. A specific example of this would be that moment in *Harlan County USA* where Florence Reese's aged, cracked voice sings 'Which Side Are You On'. Within the narrative organisation of *Harlan County USA* this becomes a strategy aimed at creating a space of historical continuity, linking the 'bloody Harlan' of 1931 with the situation of 1972. Reese thereby is constructed as a repository of all those

interim years of struggle and suffering. *Harlan County USA* is shot through with similar strategies, as when another old woman says

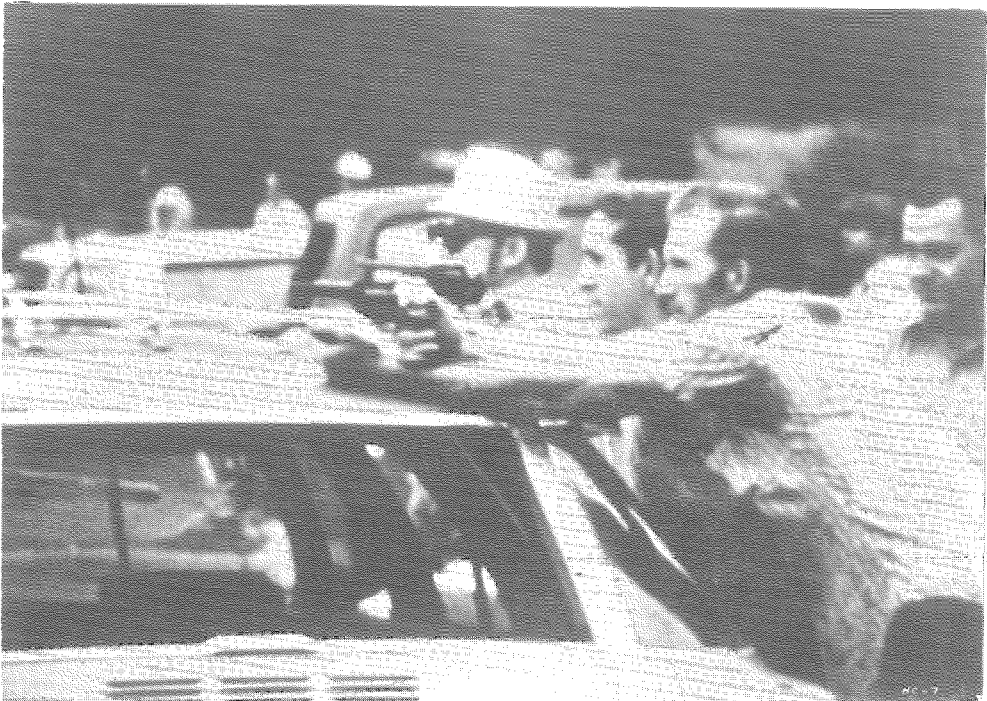
I've been through all this in the 30s. They may shoot me but they can't shoot the union out of me.

Or when Lawrence Jones' mother 'rewrites' her son's death

That's what my son was shot over . . . he was shot for the union, and I don't want my kids ever to be a yellow-backed scab. I want them to be a union man.

Or when a family recalls having watched its father die of black-lung disease and then having vowed to 'get the coal company'. These strategies are related to similar strategies evident in the development of oral history as a subgenre

7 Bertolt Brecht, in John Willett (ed), *Brecht on Theatre*, London, Eyre-Methuen, 1964, pp 96-97.



Harlan County USA

14 of labour history and perhaps are thought to solve the problem of 'evidence'. But any strategy which locates evidence/history unproblematically in the human, the natural, means that history is held to reside in the subjectivities of its participants, in their individuated perception of events. Politics thereby tends to be given at the level of the body and inevitably becomes heavily moralised. A series of witnesses are unanswerable in their existential authenticity; they are constructed as incontrovertible within a textual system which effectively forecloses any possibility of dialogue and analysis.

Stuart Hall remarked recently, 'we know, for example, that in marxist theory, the category of experience cannot be an unproblematic one'.⁸ Yet the formats used for these recent documentaries would tend to suggest that experience is unproblematic. The interview format of *Union Maids* provides a clear example of the sorts of practices I'm citing in that it offers a highly ideological construction of history as defined by the presence or absence of individuals who become, thereby, archives. The interview format in *Union Maids* constructs a notion of history as experienced by subjects but the film has nothing to say about the rules which construct interviews and subjects in and for interviews. The unasked question resting behind all the questions asked of the three women in *Union Maids* is something like: 'Would history have been different without you?'

What occurs in these recent political documentaries is the intersection of a form of historicism with a documentary mode organised along the lines of classical narrative. Keith Tribe, writing on this question which might be termed 'the cinema-history effect' commented:

The combination of historicism with film

*results often in a humanism which constructs historical narrative as the actions of historical persons . . . History in the cinema thus too easily presupposes that the historicity of events rests on the faithful representations of the agents of the history.*⁹

In a related context Michel Foucault has observed

*The desire to make historical analysis the discourse of continuity and the desire to make human consciousness the originating subject of all learning and all practice are the two traces of one and the same system of thought. This system conceives time in terms of totalization and revolution never as anything but a coming to consciousness.*¹⁰

Union Maids is a film in which the notion of individuals coming to consciousness is very strong and it seems a pertinent example of the way (again quoting Tribe):

*In film, historicism and humanism become complementary problems: the attempt to realise a history regresses rapidly to a humanism as its support in which the person is the bearer of the history, the visible agent of historicity, in whose actions are inscribed the truth of the past.*¹¹

Union Maids tells its story of past events through an uncontested representation of the memories of three women 'who

8 Stuart Hall, 'Marxism and culture', *Radical History Review* no 18, Fall 1978, p 11.

9 Keith Tribe, 'History and the production of memories', *Screen*, vol 18, no 4, 1977/78, p 22.

10 Michel Foucault, 'A reply to the Cercle d'Epistemologie', *Theoretical Practice* no 3/4, p 112.

11 Tribe, op cit, p 22

rose to the demands of their time'. The narrativisation of the memories of these three women inevitably accords them an exemplary or exceptional status at the same time as the film's populist thrust insists on their ordinariness and replaceability. This opposition of ordinary/extraordinary or typical/transcendent is a direct effect of the film's ordering as a textual system and is bound in with the problem the film has in relating individual memory to class collectivity. This is one among several contradictions which persistently threaten *Union Maids'* coherent discourse. Given that it is the function of a classical narrative system to suppress and suture such potentially discontinuous or contradictory features, any reading of such texts should notice precisely how that suturing occurs. This would be a reading aimed at uncovering some of the tropes used by a film such as *Union Maids* in order for it to tell the kind of history it does.

Such a reading of *Union Maids* could begin by considering a simple but central point alluded to earlier: the relation holding among the archival footage, the anecdotal reminiscences constructed in the interviews and the bridging voice-over narration (spoken by the three women) talking about 'America in the 1930s'. In her *Cineaste* review of the film Ruth McCormick stated that the 'rare photos and newsreel footage of the 1930s . . . [are] just right' and later added, 'Even beyond the accounts of the women, the newsreels speak for themselves'. On the contrary I would argue that these images from the archive are mute. They must be read but the possibility of a wrong reading, one which saw these images as no more than a series of representations susceptible to re-interpretation, is insured against by the familiar strategy of linking the images to the anecdotal narratives of

the three character icons. This linking and harmonising need not have occurred: it doesn't occur in Godard's work, for example. In *Union Maids* it is a linking aimed at securing a specific reading. It is one of a number of textual strategies aimed at constructing, in Foucault's phrase, a 'discourse of continuity' which results not in 'the past' but rather in the effect of the past.

In making these sorts of comments I'm urging a wariness in the face of a narrative system which tends to universalise that which it represents. In *Union Maids* militance is held to be universal, timeless, always waiting below the surface of a placid people (as opposed to being exemplarily present within these three women at a particular historical conjuncture). Kate's final speech — the 'let the people decide' speech — is no different from Ma Joad's at the end of John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*. If one were producing a counter-text to *Union Maids* it would be useful to insert Ma Joad's speech, the cab scene from *On the Waterfront*, dub over Frank Sinatra singing 'My Way' as a means of demonstrating that similar tropes organise other texts.

In the same way one should question the use made of songs in *Harlan County USA* and *Union Maids* since their effect is always to hold a reading at the level of the visceral, the affective, the nostalgic. Their use is celebrative and cathartic and it should be enough to note that recent popular songs such as 'Shaddup you Face' or 'Come on Aussie, Come on' are quite as catchy as 'Solidarity Forever' or 'Carry it On'.

In raising objections of this kind (all centering on the questions of the 'cinema-history effect' in these documentaries) the question of the kind of access to the present offered by a film such as *Union Maids* has to be confronted. The

- 16 celebration of the film in *Cineaste* and *Jump-Cut* derives from the belief that the film *does* provide such access. It is seen as a film which reasserts

*the potential of leadership by people who are at once exceptional and ordinary.*¹²

This is an example of a reading that is thoroughly complicit with certain textual mechanisms which have worked to secure it. For the dialectic of exceptional/ordinary is no more than the effect of a particular narrative ordering, a documentary using a populist classical narrative mode. If this is the case then one can't simply read the images as having an innate and timeless pertinence, as having immediate relevance to contemporary contexts. A similar qualification would need to be made of the *Jump Cut/Cineaste* judgment of *Union Maids* as being

*about working class history made to become part of the working class future.*¹³

I'll try to ground these general criticisms in a specific instance, one which concerns the rather limited understanding of unionism provided by the film.

In *Union Maids* the union is represented as a vehicle for the expression of pre-existing, almost genetic values. So much is clear from the three narrators' accounts of their family origins and the way this related to their subsequent immersion in radicalism. They were destined for it. This notion of the union as a vessel for their already-formed characters, this mode of constructing unionism, presents a problem for the film. For if the union movement is a vehicle for the expression of essential values then how does one account for the fact that shop-floor racism exists, the

fact that a fore-lady *has* to be black, the fact that a black man is not allowed in the workshop? This problem is dealt with in a very interesting way. Sylvia gives a boss's speech in the guise of unionism; that is, that in a time of high unemployment you either work with the black guy or you go ('just go down the nearest street corner and find one hundred more'). But this is followed by another, quite different, story around the question of racism in the union. In this second story (Stella's), colour is erased by the communality of working together. The trope here is that of an homogenous essence in the working class, conditioned by their labour. But this second account denies those immediately preceding events (Sylvia's story) where integration was achieved not by a quasi-religious view of labour but by the threat of punitive action from the union, punitive action of precisely the kind associated with bosses and management. The narrative here effects a rapid rewriting of history in favour of another, rosier version of the working class; a narrative denial is effected to produce an ideological representation of the working class. For a moment *Union Maids* posed the working class in terms other than that of an homogenous entity conditioned by work, only to have this rapidly replaced by the view that unionism harmonises racism.¹⁴

12 Linda Gordon, 'Union maids: Working class heroines', *Jump Cut* no 14, p 34.

13 *ibid*, p 34.

14 For an account of a film practice (other than Godard's) which does not use this system of representation, see Claire Johnston and Paul Willemsen, 'Brecht in Britain: The independent political film (on *The Nightcleaners*)', *Screen*, vol 16, no 4, pp 101-118. The following statement seems appropriate in the context of my remarks on *Union Maids* 'It [*The Nightcleaners*] avoids the trap of presenting the working class as an ideologically homogenous bloc and focusses on internal contradictions as well.' (p 108).

In noticing such elisions of potential contradictions one also notices that narrative is a system with its own effects. Narrative produces a syntagmatic flow of events, an easy diachronic progression which ensures a working out of all problems, guarantees an increase in knowledge on the reader's part, promises containment and completion. And when moments arise which threaten incoherence in the ordering of the discourse, these incoherencies are recast as momentary deviations.

What point is there in telling stories in which individuals either fulfil or fail to fulfil morally given imperatives, stories which deal in destiny or damnation? What does it mean after all to construct a narrative history of the kind given in *Union Maids*, to seek to recover an historical origin, a past which is defined existentially? Any sustained analysis of *Harlan County USA* or *Union Maids* instead should notice the way the *effect* of 'experience' is constructed, notice the textual mechanisms at work producing these effects rather than going immediately, affectively to the produced effects. To see history in terms of an origin means that the present is understood in terms of fulfilling that origin: one is consigned to destiny or guilt. For an origin means that any action is no more than a realising of that which already exists, contained in the origin. One way of noticing how limited is *Union Maids'* understanding of the conditions making possible the formation of unions — and the place of women within them — would be to ask how useful the film's representational mode is to an understanding of working class and feminist movements *now*. Given that the film attributes a common origin to working class and feminist movements (it rewrites the history of unionism as if

it had been female) one might ask what use is this attribution of a common origin *now*? Origins clearly are unimportant in terms of current political conditions and calculations. Why should political action now bother to recover a common origin? Do working class and feminist movements have an essence in their origin or are they instead quite fragmented? The discontinuities within feminism would be evident from a scrutiny of its sites of reproduction (pedagogical institutions, government instrumentalities, political parties, theoretical journals, conferences). Plainly feminism as a theoretical practice is not unified by an notion of a common origin and to that extent shares no common origin with unionism.

What then might be put in place of *Union Maids*? Trying to provide an anti-historicist reading of a humanist-historicist text must be a prelude to a more direct form of textual intervention (which could take the form of the production of the counter-text alluded to earlier). We must refuse the film in its current form (a form in which we've encountered many others like it). Anti-historicism

*abandons the past as a principle of validation which dominates all other concerns; it instead argues that 'history' is something perpetually constructed in a specific conjuncture . . . The conditions of production of history are not the acts of revelation of a past but are determinate relations in a given conjuncture.*¹⁵

Another way of phrasing this is to say that history surely has to be more immediate than any representation of an origin. As Stephen Heath phrases it:

15 Tribe, *op cit*, p 12.

- 18 *effective memory for struggle . . . will not be a function of the past but of the present, will be a production.*¹⁶

So the work of any reading of *Union Maids* or any other of these recent political documentaries must concentrate on the various moments of textual *compromise*, those suturings which banish other modes of analysing these same problems. Such analyses would point to the *trained* nature of the reading and writing of texts, a training of reading and writing which, for example, produced *Union Maids* in its current form (and it must be stressed that this form is powerfully actual). Such an analysis could show that the writing of a text such as *Union Maids* occurs within the conditions of its reading; that is to say within certain traditions of populist cultural history and literature (a fact evidenced in the very familiarity of its tropes). It is this circularity of writing and reading which clinches the text's effectivity, and this means that a reading of it cannot afford to let that circle close. In seeking to resist those highly familiar and persuasive sets of rhetorical conventions, we need to imagine other modes of representation (for example, a text which depicted its own strategies and practices and which did not provide a complete, unified representation of class and collectivity). In Rancière's words:

*the problem is not to reconstitute but to produce because the problem is not to unite but to divide.*¹⁷

If it is the spontaneous function both of cinema and of memory to unite then this function must be resisted. We surely don't need to recover a unanimist way into class struggle nor do we need to rediscover a suppressed tradition. The difficulty confronting any sustained analysis of these recent political

documentaries is that one would want to be anti-historicist without at the same time seeming to be destructively anti-historical. No one would want to deny or deride past struggles but nor would one necessarily want to accept unequivocally the representations/reconstructions of these struggles when given, say, in the form of *Harlan County USA* and *Union Maids*. A Brechtian maxim might be usefully borne in mind when trying to think of practices of film-making and film criticism which could differ from the ones mentioned throughout this article:

*Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones.*¹⁸

In the case of *Union Maids* this might mean starting from the fact of the interview format itself, refusing the kind of function it performs in the film as it currently stands.¹⁹

16 Stephen Heath, 'Contexts', *Edinburgh Magazine* 1977.

17 Jacques Rancière, Interview, 'L'Image Fraternelle', *Cahiers du Cinema* nos 268/69, abridged translation in *Edinburgh Magazine* 1977, pp 26-31.

18 Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London, New Left Books, 1976, p 121.

19 Had this been a longer article I might have spent more time on the 'line' of journals such as *Jump Cut*, *Cineaste* and *Socialist Review*. For the moment, Lesley Stern's comments in 'Feminism and Cinema — Exchanges', *Screen*, vol 20 nos 3/4 (especially pp 94-96) seem to me very applicable to the reviews I am discussing.

I would also like to thank Ian Hunter, Dugald Williamson and Ric Phillips for their contributions in the writing of this article. The responsibility for the final form of the article is, of course, my own.

Union Maids and *Harlan County USA* are available in the UK from The Other Cinema, 79 Wardour St, London W1. *Union Maids* is also available from Contemporary Films, 55 Greek St, London W1.

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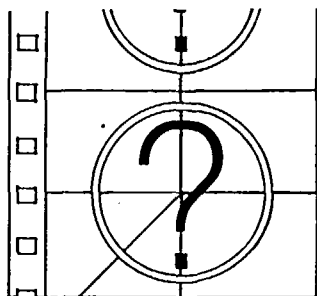
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MICK EATON

LAUGHTER IN THE DARK

In January 1981 the BFI Education Department, in conjunction with North West Arts, organised a weekend school in Manchester entitled 'A Serious Look at Comedy'. Its intentions were both broad and introductory. It ranged from an examination of different forms of comedy narrative within film and television, the appeal of comedy fictions to different types of audience, to ideological questions about the 'progressiveness' of film and television comedy. Unfortunately, the breadth of these concerns and the different statuses of the topics meant that by the end of the weekend, though the organisers had shown the dearth and paucity of current writing on comedy narrative, there seemed to be a general feeling that none of these areas had been looked at sufficiently to see how best to continue the work. Significantly, psychoanalytic work on comedy, though a concern of the first presentation by Jim Cook, was largely forgotten as discussion moved on to the

safer ground of formal distinctions between types of narrative and the ideological appropriateness of these fictions. Speaking as someone who has been working on comedy fiction over the last few years on an occasional basis and who has found the lure of formal and institutional analysis hard to resist, I would like to redress this balance slightly by suggesting an approach to the problem of connecting Freud's work on jokes with the kind of comedy fictions we are used to as cinema goers and television viewers.

Tony Allen, the 'alternative stand-up comic', does a routine in which he is approached by the Anti-Nazi League to perform at one of their benefits. The organiser tentatively asks him over the phone whether his humour is 'anti-black' — he thinks that it isn't. The next question is whether his humour is 'anti-women'. Again the answer is no. Allen replies that he should warn the organiser that his humour has a broader

22 span, 'it's anti-life'. 'That's OK,' says the organiser, 'that's not an area of current concern'.

However, as the weekend demonstrated, comedy is an area of current concern. Questions relating to why we laugh, what makes us laugh, what formal devices are manipulated in comedy narratives need at least to be asked, if not answered. Allen's joke indicates that discussions of comedy cannot be separated from ideological/political positions available in a class society. Does laughter re-inforce the stereotypes and prejudices, or by laughing can we come to view them in a new light; exposed as social fictions? Are we liberated by laughter?

These questions can be seen to cut across the formal distinctions of comedy narratives which we often find in writing on the cinema. For example, John Ellis, in his article on Ealing studios ('Made in Ealing', *Screen*, vol 16 no 1, 1975) distinguishes two kinds of comedy: one which 'rests on a natural language and deals with social disruption', and another kind which 'is aware of language and works by deconstructing it and recombining it'. This distinction was implicit in much of the work on Frank Tashlin and Jerry Lewis that appeared in French ciné-magazines in the 1950s and 1960s (see Willemsen and Johnston (eds), *Frank Tashlin*, Edinburgh Film Festival, 1973) and, to an extent, can also be seen to be behind the distinction common in the industry between 'sophisticated comedy' (which depends largely on verbal humour, dialogue and characterisation) and 'screwball comedy' (dependent on narrative disruption through the gag, etc). The first is the comedy of, for example, Lubitsch, Capra and Sturges. The second that of The Marx Brothers, Tashlin, Monty Python and so on. Steve Neale (*Genre*, BFI, London, 1980) suggests

that these two formal models are only 'tendencies'. I would argue that it is in the interplay between these two tendencies that we may be able to situate a tension in Freud's work on jokes (Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Penguin, London, 1976) and can then begin to consider 'ideological effects' of comedy fiction.

If we apply this distinction too rigidly we are left with two separate models of narrative available for comedy fiction, across a range of discursive practices: one which remains within the formal scope of 'realism', and one which is seen as a meta-linguistic commentary on and analysis of the 'natural language' of realist narrative. These characterisations frequently carry with them a qualitative judgment which may blind us to specific workings of individual texts and the institutional factors involved in the formation of a text. If the defining characteristic of the first tendency, the social (situation) comedy, consists of 'the disturbance of socially institutionalised discursive hierarchies' (Neale, op cit, p 24) then comedy narrative cannot be seen as at all specific in the way its closure operates to re-order those same discursive hierarchies. So what remains to designate a product as specifically 'comedy' lies in those excesses — gags, verbal wit, performance skills — which momentarily suspend the narrative. Once again we are back with the tautology, 'it's a comedy because it makes us laugh' — the tautology of genre recognition. There are many examples of this. I will just choose two from the films screened at the weekend. The *dénouement* of *Carry on Cabby* (1963) consists of a car chase in which cab drivers prevent the abduction of their wives. In so doing they close the narrative, re-establishing the nuclear family as the approved order of social relationships, as the only possible way

society can deal with the problem of sexual difference. It would be ludicrous to argue for a comic specificity of the structure of this 'plot'. Similar articulations would be easy to find in the western, the gangster film and so on. Again, in *Christmas in July* (Preston Sturges, 1940), in which Dick Powell thinks he has won a 25 thousand dollar competition (but we know he hasn't), the comedy is generated by the audience's differential access to knowledge from that of the characters in the film. Structurally, doesn't this sound similar to suspense? One makes us chuckle, the other gasp, but the reasons for these different reactions are not to be found in the narrative structure. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere ('Television Situation Comedy', *Screen* vol 19 no 4, 1978/9) audience recognition of the play with generic conventions is often indispensable to the functioning of comedy narrative.

As regards the second tendency, the comedy of formal disruption, I would argue that it is never possible to deal adequately with these texts outside of their social and narrative implications. The film chosen at the weekend to illustrate this tendency was *The Disorderly Orderly* (Frank Tashlin, 1964; starring Jerry Lewis) in which many of the gags are directed against medicine for money, the mindlessness of show-biz, and, finally, the market economy. The film could easily be viewed as having a loose, intrusive and mawkish narrative (dealing with Lewis's attempts to deal with his childish idealisation of Susan, a fantasy object from his schooldays, and to settle down with Julie, the nurse who loves him for what he could be and whom he 'really' loves), which is interspersed with hilarious gags and set-pieces of formal deconstruction. If it is seen in this way then the narrative is at best a 'set-up' which the

gags continually displace, or at worst it is a tedious irrelevance to be sweated through until the next gag. However, it is possible, without going into great detail here, to see the Oedipal structure of the narrative — Lewis's attempts to expel the Father — as providing the determining articulation of the gags, which centre largely on Lewis's inadequate attempts to control the excess of orgasmic energy bursting from every spastic limb of his body and to direct them towards one love-object. Seen in this way the narrative is not an intrusive irrelevance, rather it provides a structural basis for the individual gags. The fact that this film displays a consciousness of narrative does not mean that it escapes a narrative articulation.

The two tendencies remain, all I am suggesting is that they are manipulated differently in different texts. Similarly, we can only talk about the articulation of narrative elements in relation to institutional factors. Again, two brief examples should suffice. In the television situation comedy, the disorder created by the entry of outside elements which threatens the initial situation can only be resolved by an expulsion of those elements, or the series would collapse as a series. An interesting deviation from this occurred in the episode of *Fawlty Towers* (BBC 1978) in which John Cleese as Basil Fawlty discovers a dead man in one of the rooms of his hotel and attempts to hide the corpse from his other customers. The show ended with the discovery of the body, which left Basil with the only possibility of fleeing the situation in a laundry basket. The outside element proved incapable of ejection, so the main character had to be expelled instead. However, our acceptance of the series format allowed us to forget this in time for the following week's episode which started with Basil again back in the

24 hotel and the situation back to its unstable equilibrium. The institutional form of the television situation comedy proved stronger than the demands of narrative consistency. A different institutional structure can be seen in 1930s tivo-reeler movies series, starring such acts as The Three Stooges or Laurel and Hardy (important antecedents of the television situation comedy form). In the movies of Laurel and Hardy we often see a progressive exploitation of one initial flaw in the founding situation leading with relentless logic to a complete destruction of that situation — a narrative structure that sounds very similar to that of classical tragedy. What remains stable from film to film is the character of the two main protagonists — the situation itself is continually shifting and continually being annihilated.

Narrative form and institutional demand; realist social fiction and the formal disruption of the gag; the confirmation of social stereotypes and the de-mystifying of institutions of meaning — where does Freud's work fit into all this? One place to start might be an examination of a tension that runs through his book on the joke, which could be characterised as a tension between the formal and the semantic components of the joke. It seems quite clear that for Freud it is the formal components, the way the joke 'works' linguistically, that are its initial and essential defining characteristics (see Freud, op cit, esp pp 49ff). As one commentator has put it in a very useful article:

If this is so, it is because the joke represents the attempt of the mature psyche to retain the childish pleasure of pure play, which Freud conceives as being

intrinsically independent of the constraints of meaning and its logic. (Samuel Weber 'The Divaricator Remarks on Freud's Witz', *Glyph* no 1, 1977.)

The pleasure generated from this play is seen to turn on *the recognition of the familiar* (see Freud, op cit, chap IV, esp pp 170ff).

It would be quite easy to discover the recognition of the familiar across the discursive terms of the comedy narratives I have already discussed. Simply to elaborate in relation to the situation comedy we might think of the familiarity of the form itself; the recognition of the familiar across the range of television programmes, other television genres; the familiarity of the range of institutions, issues, concerns, and characters that are represented in the shows.

However, though this formal aspect is the one Freud seems to insist on throughout the book, this insistence is gradually eroded: a 'good' joke not only involves us in pure play, but also demands a connection at the level of its semantic components, at the level of the joke's sense'. One example he gives is *traduttore* — *traditore* ('to translate is to betray') where the play of similar sounding words is not by itself sufficient, (even though 'childishly' playful) it is the pertinence of the sense that distinguishes this epigram. Another example is his discussion of the one-liner 'a wife is like an umbrella, sooner or later you take a cab'. Freud discusses this in relation to its formal components, the playful aspect of this unlikely metaphor with its apparent lack of logic (Freud, op cit, p 119). He then presents an elaboration of the sense of the joke and its relation to male cynicism at bourgeois marriage as an adequate means of regulating sexual desire (Freud, op cit, p 156). It is at the

interface of non-sense on a syntagmatic level, and sense on the paradigmatic level, that the joke sets up the possibility of illumination — of seeing familiar things, familiar people, familiar institutions in a new light. The discussion becomes more complex — we are not just dealing with the recognition of the familiar, but also with a de-familiarisation of the familiar. It is in this way that Freud's work on jokes seems to prefigure the much later discussion of the *fort-da* game in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. Perhaps this is being elided when Freud says that jokes instance a rebellion against authority. Even if there is always some element of transgression of the codes of conventional logic, conventional propriety, conventional film and television forms (in this instance), the possibility of illumination is nevertheless ultimately dependent on our knowledge and recognition of that logic, that propriety, those conventional forms. I would argue that it is in this tension, this pull, between the recognition of the familiar and the possibility of the transgression of conventions that we need to situate any discussion on the formal characteristics of comedy narrative as well as discussions about the ideological nature and function of comedy, whether it be the joke, the comedy film, the situation comedy or whatever.

One consequence of this is that we should tread warily when applying ideological judgements to formal mechanisms, such as we often see in the search for the 'progressive' situation comedy. Confining myself to television here (though the argument is equally applicable to film), the transgression of realist codes, the dismantling of formal conventions which we see in many comedy shows (be they of the 'social (situation)' tendency, or the 'formal

disruption' tendency) paradoxically serves only to re-inforce the immediacy of the television image as a constant source of reference and plentitude — 'our window on the world'. It is no accident that so many commercials, hardly the site of a 'progressive' television practice, play with the codes and conventions of the rest of television. This play may all too often work only to emphasise the importance of these conventions, their naturalness, and the delight we share in recognising our slavish dependence on them.

The realisation of this pull between the transgression of the familiar and the familiarisation of the transgression leads to the conclusion that whilst comedy can be directed *against* anything, it can not be analytical *of* anything — for, as Freud warns us, to analyse a joke is to render it incapable of making us laugh.





Carry on Cabby (1963)



The Disorderly Orderly (1964)



Blockheads (1938)



Busy Bodies (1933)



Duck Soup (1933)



Christmas in July (1949)

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND COMEDY

I WANT HERE to supplement Mick Eaton's remarks on comedy in this issue by considering some of the component aspects of comedy, its structure of address and the subjective mechanisms involved. Focusing initially on Freud's work on jokes and the comic, I want to elaborate on those aspects of Eaton's article which draw on psychoanalysis, and approach the politics of comedy from a slightly different angle.

Eaton refers, during the course of his argument, to an article by Samuel Weber, 'The Divaricator: Remarks on Freud's Witz'.¹ Weber's article is concerned, among other things, to discuss and define the structure of address involved in the joke, using Freud's remarks on 'smut' (*Zote*) as a basis.

Freud defined smut as involving the participation of not two people, but three. Smut 'is directed to a particular person, by whom one is sexually excited and who, on hearing it, is expected to become aware of the speaker's excitement and as a result to become sexually excited in turn'.² There is thus initially a first person, who desires another, and a second person, the one who is thus desired. For Freud, paradigmatically, the former is male, the latter is female, and the female is expected to resist; the object of desire is barred. And this proves, indeed, to be the case, 'the sexually exciting speech becomes an end in itself'.³ Smut proper turns then into a particular form of joke. The aggression inherent in the situation is amplified, intensified, and the sexually exciting speech comes more and more to involve the participation of a third person: 'gradually, in the place of the woman, the onlooker, now the listener, becomes the person to whom the smut

1 Samuel Weber,
'The Divaricator:
Remarks on
Freud's Witz',
Glyph, no 1, 1977.

2 Sigmund Freud,
*Jokes and their
Relations to the
Unconscious*,
Penguin, London,
1976, p 140.

3 *ibid*, p 142.

4 *ibid*, p 143.

5 Weber, *op cit*,
p 21.

6 *ibid*, p 21.

7 Paul Willemen,
'Letter to John',
Screen, vol 21 no
2, Summer 1980,
pp 62-3.

8 Jeffrey Mehlman,
'How to Read
Freud on Jokes:
The Critic as
Schadchen', *New
Literary History*,
vol 6 no 12,
Winter 1975.

is addressed'.⁴ 'From this point on,' writes Weber, 'it becomes clear that, where the Witz is concerned, the pleasure of the first person will be mediated by, and dependent on, that of the third.'⁵

Weber, like Freud, stresses the importance of this tripartite structure, claiming it, again like Freud, as 'paradigmatic for the joke in general'.⁶ (Freud uses it in particular as the paradigm for what he terms 'tendentious jokes', jokes with a specific object). It may not immediately be clear as to why this should be the case, especially in Freud's account, where the socio-sexual particularities of the situation are well to the fore. Weber's account, however, seeks the *structure* of the situation, and here the precise nature of the paradigm begins to emerge. The structure is marked by the presence of the following elements: eroticism, aggression, a (displaced or absent) object of desire, speech (language, signification), and an other whose presence and whose reactions are crucial to the status both of the speech and its speaker. With all these elements in place, the structure can be read as the structure of desire itself: language, a speaking subject, an other (Lacan's *objet petit a*), an Other (site of the instances of the symbolic and the Law), and pleasure and aggression as effects of the relations between them. Smut is the paradigm of the joke insofar as its structure is the structure of desire, a further point then being that the 'persons' referred to by Freud and by Weber need not, as Paul Willemen has pointed out, be separate persons or individuals as such: 'any censorship mechanism, whether internal or external to A [the first person] is equally effective in setting in motion the series of substitutions and displacements described'.⁷ What is being referred to are places or points within a discursive process. And these places or points can be occupied by one and the same individual.

This point about desire is also made in an analysis by Jeffrey Mehlman of Freud's work on jokes.⁸ Mehlman stresses the extent to which the parallels between smut and desire emerge as the consequence of a distance in both from 'brute instinct', of the intervention in both of language and speech, and of the absence in both of the object:

The third person soon acquires 'the greatest importance' in the development of smut . . . With the transition from a dual to a triangular configuration, the loss of the object is consolidated. The joke is consummated when the woman leaves the room. The centre of gravity of the interaction has shifted from the second

to the third . . . term. But that third term . . . is less a term (a person) than a symbolic circuit, a structure of exchange which happens secondarily to find support or incarnation in an additional person. He embodies the 'sign' (system) as obstacle to an unmediated satisfaction of instinct.⁹

The third person emerges, again, as the site of the symbolic (understood as the instance of signification itself) and the Law (understood as the order(s) of its cultural organisation). The implications of this will be examined more closely later.

Given these parallels, this paradigm, it is no accident that Weber's article proceeds from here to an account of the *fort/da* game. This is the game described by Freud in which a child throws and retrieves a cotton reel. The reel serves as a symbol of the mother and *fort* ('gone')/*da* ('there') are the child's exclamation when the reel is thrown out of sight and then retrieved. Its significance is seen not simply to reside in its acting as a basis for the playful and repetitive aspects of the joke, nor in its acting as a basis for an explanation of those pleasures of joking which involve recognition. The *fort/da* instead places these pleasures firmly within a field of ambivalence and conflict. The joke and the *fort/da* both involve 'the use of language and a certain pleasure in repetition'.¹⁰ Both involve also 'the loss of object that defines the structure of desire'.¹¹ And both involve an aggression against the absent object as a corollary of the desire to master its absence and as a corollary also, therefore, of the threat to the narcissistic development of the ego that that absence entails. Hence 'it is in this sense', writes Weber, 'that the play of the child may, indeed, mark the origin and nucleus of Witz: a pleasure which, being inherently narcissistic, would necessarily have to include aggression as one of its decisive elements, and which, like that play, would inevitably depend upon *verbal discourse* to achieve its ends'.¹²

Now it is at this point, at the point of insistence upon the importance of language and the tripartite structure to the nature of the joke, that there opens up a gap between Freud's remarks on jokes, on the one hand, and his remarks upon the instance of 'the comic', on the other, making it difficult to inscribe the points made so far into a discussion of the characteristics of comedy in a simple manner.

The comic is discussed by Freud in the following terms. First, it is seen fundamentally as something that is found or discovered,

9 *ibid*, p 449.

10 Weber, *op cit*, p 22.

11 *ibid*, p 23.

12 *ibid*, p 25.

as something that can simply and unintentionally happen:

*The comic arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery from human social relations. It is found in people — in their movements, forms, actions and traits of character, originally in all probability only in their physical characteristics but later in their mental ones as well, or as the case may be, in the expression of those characteristics.*¹³

Secondly the comic essentially involves only two persons, two places: the one who is comic and the one who laughs. The latter (the first person in Freud's schema) identifies with the former (the second person) in order to affirm — in a spasm of laughter a difference from and a superiority to them. Thus the second person may be clumsy or may make a naïve remark. The first person compares how he or she would speak or behave in the same situation and laughter is a result of the difference. Precisely to that extent, to the extent that mastery, superiority and a narcissistic investment in the ego of the first person are involved, so hostility and aggression are seen by Freud as inherent in all forms of the comic. It is worth noting here the extent to which comics and comic sequences and gags depend precisely on audience superiority. Comic figures and characters like Harry Langdon, Jerry Lewis, Inspector Clouseau, Basil Fawlty, are often naïve, stupid, crass or unintelligent. This is where Mick Eaton's point about comedy and the audience's superior narrative knowledge fits in. It is also worth noting that aggression and superiority tend often to oscillate across and between the viewer and the characters, on the one hand, and the characters themselves, on the other. The viewer's aggression, possibly amplified by the pressures of identification involved in the process of the comic, is articulated into the narrative of the film itself and into the pattern of relations between the characters involved. Hence much of the Marx Brothers comedy. Hence the relations between Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis, Morecambe and Wise. And hence the almost unmitigated aggression involved in a series like *Fawlty Towers*. Once again, the fact that these places are points in a structure, or process, and are thus not necessarily occupied by different individuals needs to be stressed: it is perfectly possible to find *oneself* comic, to laugh at one's own naïvety, clumsiness, stupidity. Here, comic laughter can be seen quite blatantly as a mechanism for the restoration of the

narcissism of the ego, disturbed momentarily by those aspects of oneself at which one laughs.

Freud is concerned to stress the *differences* between the comic and the joke: 'A joke is made, the comic is found',¹⁴ he writes. Where the joke involves three people, three terms, the comic involves only two, 'a first who finds what is comic and a second in whom it is found. The third person, to whom the comic thing is told, intensifies the comic process but adds nothing new to it. In a joke this third person is indispensable for the completion of the pleasure-producing process'.¹⁵ The joke is a matter of artifice, of signs, of language, the comic, it would seem, is not. These differences and distinctions are reiterated, in turn, by Jeffrey Mehlman:

*Jokes, we recall, require a triangular interaction, involving subject (teller), object (the woman who disappears), and a third person to whom the joke is told. The comic, on the other hand, may be content with two persons . . . Thus whereas the transition from smut to jokes was from a dual to a triangular relation, the passage from jokes to the comic is from a triangular to a dual one. And whereas the genesis of the jokes [sic] was dependent on a new 'pleasure in signs' [Freud's terms], the linguistic dimension loses significance in the case of the comic.*¹⁶

But are these differences quite what they seem? There are two issues to be raised here. The first concerns the status and makeup of the two different structures being compared. It seems to me that there are, indeed, differences between them, but that the differences are such as to make such easy and simple comparisons, based solely on the number of points involved in each structure, somewhat suspect. For where the structure described in relation to the joke is clearly a structure of *address* (with the first person the addressor and the third the addressee), that of the comic is instead what might more correctly be termed a structure of *observation* (with the first person here the observer, the discoverer of the comic, and the second the one thus observed). Clearly, two differently oriented structures are being compared, with two distinct sets of functions. Comparing the numbered points they each involve, solely on the basis of the number Freud assigns them (one, two, or three, as the case may be), can only be even more confusing. If any points in the two different structures are in any way comparable, they are point *three* in the joke structure and

14 *ibid*, p 239.

15 *ibid*, p 238.

16 Mehlman, *op cit*, p 458.

point *one* in the comic structure, since it is at these points that the common function of laughter occurs.

The second issue is just as fundamental. The comic may, indeed, as Mehlman claims, be less dependent upon a 'pleasure from signs', upon 'the linguistic dimension' (though that in itself, I would argue, is highly debatable since all human activity, including activity that may be found to be comic, is both meaning and significant — ie full of signification). But the comic is not synonymous with comedy. And comedy certainly *does* involve a 'pleasure from signs', a 'linguistic dimension', if only by virtue of the fact that comedies, comic texts, are, indeed, texts, and as such are by definition structured networks of signs in process. While the comic, as a general phenomenon, is not reducible to comedy as a genre of discourse and textuality, equally, comedy and its characteristics are not simply reducible to the comic. And to the extent that comedy is a mode of signification, it shares aspects not only of the comic but also of the joke. The issue then is the extent to which and the ways in which comedy combines aspects of the comic and the joke, and the extent to which and the ways in which it involves the two different structures associated with them.

Clearly, just as comedy is irreducible to the comic (and *vice versa*), so equally it is irreducible to the joke. If anything, comedy is a string, a sequence, a *narration* of jokes and joke-like structures (ie gags, comic segments). Hence the importance of Eaton's stress on the significance of narrative and narrative structures to a consideration of comedy: the gags, jokes and segments which the narration inscribes are not ultimately separable from the narration itself. The narration transforms their status and meaning by acting as the agent of their articulation and by providing the context of significance in relation to which they are read. Precisely to the extent that this is the case, so it is impossible simply to synthesise the two structures associated with the joke and the comic together as an account of the structures of intersubjectivity and address characteristically involved in comedy. Consequently all I want to do here is to reiterate each of the five points involved in the structures so as to comment briefly on their possible significance for a definition or consideration of comedy.

Taking the structure of the comic first, point one, the first person, is the observer, the spectator, the one who discovers what is comic and who laughs. A narcissistically-oriented aggression and superiority involve themselves in this particular instance

of subjectivity as a consequence of the position occupied in relation to the second person, in whom the comic is found. Clearly, there are parallels here between the first person and the spectating subject of comedy, on the one hand and the second person and the comic actor or performer on the other. Freud's own account of the psychic mechanisms would, therefore, be relevant: 'The comic effect . . . depends . . . on the *difference* between . . . two cathectic expenditures — one's own and the other person's as estimated by "empathy"'.¹⁷ This, in itself, may seem a little simple. And Mehlman, indeed, has emphasised the extent to which this mechanism, insofar as it focuses on the ego of the spectator, is, in fact, ambiguous, involving both repression and conflict:

*But is not this power which the ego affirms in comic laughter threatened from within? What if the subject were to lose control of the process of oscillation between self and other . . . Now in perceiving a particularly clumsy individual, I marshal . . . energy (through mental mimesis) and simultaneously realise that for me to perform a similar act, a much lesser expenditure of energy would be required. If it cannot be rechannelled elsewhere that difference in energy is spent in laughter. Now Freud prefaces this theory with the following comment: 'I have acquired the idea of a particular size by carrying the movement out myself or by imitating it, and through this action I have learnt a standard for this movement in my innervatory sensations' (our emphasis). Thus we are faced with the possibility that the ego to whose capacities I triumphantly compare the actions which I imitate is itself the residue of imitations . . . the comic affirmation of the power of the ego, of a power or sense of wholeness no doubt inseparable from the very existence of the ego, is eroded from within by its simultaneous assumption of the inferiority of the other. The comic, like the ego, is in rivalry with itself.*¹⁸

These remarks have a number of implications and consequences. They stress the extent to which the comic moment is, indeed, a moment, one which serves temporarily to feed the ego and the subject's narcissism, but which is inherently unstable. The moment of identification necessary to the comic process is unstable, too, to that extent. If the superiority of the ego over the other is to be attained, then the ego has to *identify* with the other first. There is thus, as Mehlman stresses, an oscillation. And it may be a consequence of that oscillation, that necessary

17 Freud, *op cit*,
p 255.

18 Mehlman, *op cit*,
pp 459-460.

moment of identification, that again, in the interests of the ego, the comic performer, in the position of the one with whom identification takes place, far from being despised as inferior, comes in fact to be loved. This may also explain why comic performers and characters are often, finally, accorded a position of superiority *vis-à-vis* other characters in the comic fiction. Also, the temporary moments of identification necessary to the instances of the comic as such will always be compounded and overlaid by the fact that these performers and characters will also be the object of narrative identification, of an identification stretching across the span of the narrative and not just its comic moments.

The status of Freud's, and Mehlman's, remarks are complicated still further in that comedy is a type of signification, a mode or genre of discourse. And here the structure of the joke becomes relevant. The first person here is the addressor, the teller of the joke. Like the first person in the structure of the comic, the first person in the joke structure is marked, as mentioned previously, by the instance of a narcissistically-oriented aggression, directed here not against an identifiable presence, but rather against the second instance in the structure, the absent object of desire. The absence or loss of that object is the condition of the emphasis, in jokes, on language and speech.

Looking at comedy in the light of these instances, there is clearly an extent to which the position of the first person could correspond to the position of the author. But the author, certainly in film and television comedy, and, I would argue, in comedy in general, is never present to the third person, the addressee, in the same way as they might be, for instance, in cabaret or, indeed, in everyday life, where the teller of the joke is visible to the audience. The author, in comedy, is a position in the text, constructed in phantasy by the spectator. The author, as such, is absent. There is an interesting parallel, though, between the author as conceived in present theory and the teller of the joke, in that the teller of the joke is rarely its creator. Jokes circulate socially, and though they may be subject to individual embellishments on the part of those who come to occupy the position of teller, the teller is rarely the originator of the joke as such. In fact, jokes are nearly always anonymous. The parallel would lie in the fact that the authors of comedy (Lubitsch, Hawks, Tashlin, Brooks, Allen, Cleese or whoever) could similarly be in no way seen as authors in the Romantic sense. Their texts would be marked by their conscious and unconscious individuality, but that

individuality itself would be socially constructed, while many aspects of the text and its circulation would lie beyond their individual control. And this is emphasised all the more by the role in the joke of the third person, the one who laughs:

The ambivalent status of narcissistic identification, . . . also marks the relationship of teller and listener, first and third person in the joke: for the joke-teller, it is the third person who, although fundamentally 'passive', is decisive. A joke is only jocular, witzig, if the listener laughs. And laughter is something which is difficult to calculate, eludes conscious control and, above all, excludes a certain cognitive consciousness. 'We do not know what we are laughing at', writes Freud in his study of jokes, and the phrase returns with the insistence of a leitmotif. The third person, as listener, decides whether or not the joke is successful — ie whether it is a joke or not — and thus, whether or not the first person really is a first person, an ego, the author, or at least the teller of a true joke.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the role of the absence of the object as the condition of language and desire and, more specifically, as the condition of the 'play' with language and of the existence of the especially intense form of pleasure (laughter) that marks the joking process is paralleled in comedy by a similar play with signs, codes, and discourses and by a similar production of laughter. Where the absence of the object could be seen as a general condition of language and desire, jokes and comedy both involve a mechanism or mechanisms which intensify the instance of desire on the one hand (marked by laughter as a burst or explosion of pleasure) and the instance of language and signification on the other (marked by those processes of the rearrangement of meaning and the sign discussed by Freud in relation to the joke and by Willemsen, Eaton and others in relation to the genre of comedy).²⁰

If we turn now to the third point in the structure, the point at which laughter occurs, we can see here fairly clear analogies between this third point, or third person, and the role of the spectator of the comic text. The third person and the spectator are both the addressees of the texts of the joke and the comedy, respectively. However, leaving aside the qualification that the joke is not comedy, that comedy is the *narration of series* of jokes, there is a further complication, that the spectating subject in comedy (indeed in any textual process) is far from being a

19 Weber, op cit, pp 25-26.

20 See Mick Eaton, article in this issue, and Paul Willemsen, 'Tashlin's Method: An Hypothesis', in Johnston and Willemsen (eds), *Frank Tashlin*, Edinburgh Film Festival, 1973.

unified instance. The third point can on the one hand be seen simply as a person and on the other, as Mehlman has stressed, as the instance of the symbolic and the Law. The third person is simply the site of a structure of exchange and an eruption of laughter, a point stressed by Weber:

The third person, as listener, decides whether or not the joke is successful — ie whether it is a joke or not . . . And yet, this decisive action of the third person lies beyond all volition — one cannot will to laugh — and outside of consciousness, insofar as one never knows, at the moment of laughter, what one is laughing at. The 'decision' of the third person, therefore, is in reality the decision of a third person neuter, of an it or an id, and not of a him or her. In the uncontrollable, explosive burst of laughter — and laughter is always, for Freud, a kind of explosion — it (id) decides and determines the status of the joke, and with it, that of the ego telling it.²¹

Moreover, if the ego of the teller is at stake, so too is the ego of the listener, insofar as laughter is a function not of that ego, but, rather, of the listener's unconscious. It may be, then, that the comic aspect of comedy works to some extent to counteract the threat that the joke-like aspects of comedy may involve, the position of superiority inscribed there working to restore the ego's position. However, given the context both of the comic and the joke within novelistic modes of narration, any disturbance or disruption of the ego's position would ultimately be contained by the narration itself, order restored by the story precisely for the ego of the viewer.

Overall, then, a consideration of the two structures and of the points and functions inscribed within them begin to specify some of the components of the address of conventional comedy (the comedy produced by the mainstream institutions of film and television). The position of the spectating subject, oscillating between the position of the author or teller on the one hand and the observer and third person on the other, and sustaining a complex articulation of narcissism and aggression across the instances of the ego and the unconscious, would then be a point for further investigation. But such an investigation would not, of itself, lead to a definition or specification of comedy as a genre, as a mode of narrative discourse. Here we have to turn to a discussion of what Freud terms 'technique'.

The joke involves the re-arrangement, so to speak, of the

relations between signifier and signified as specified by a code, working, in Mick Eaton's terms, at the 'interface' between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic planes. Within comedy itself, it is important to stress the many levels at which this kind of re-arrangement can take place. There are as many possibilities as there are 'codes traversing and articulating the text: codes of dress, codes of decorum and behaviour, codes of speech, codes of editing, codes of story-telling and narration, codes of genre and so on. Insofar as any code specifies a syntagmatic and paradigmatic order, insofar as any code thus specifies also a set of relations between a series of signifiers and a series of signifieds within a particular discursive field (fashion, decorum, story-telling, cinema, whatever), then any code can be subject to the process of joking, to the disruption and re-articulation of those orders and relations. The process takes place through the interplay of the codes involved, often, for example, through the substitution of elements pertaining to one code for elements pertaining to another. If we take just one example, Eaton's instance of the *dénouement* of *Carry on Cabby*, then, irrespective for a moment of the function of that *dénouement* within the ideological structure of a novelistic narrative, it is clear that the laughter produced by the sequence itself stems first from the insertion of a narrative syntagm from the paradigm of narrative *dénouements* appropriate to the Western (the cavalry riding to the rescue) and secondly, simultaneously, and more specifically, from the replacement of one element within that syntagm (the horse, itself an element within the paradigm of modes of transport involved in the Western) by an element (the taxi) from a similar paradigm (modes of transport) but one specifically not codified as pertaining to the genre from which the syntagm is derived.

This process involves what Mick Eaton terms 'the transgression of the familiar and the familiarisation of the transgression'. The *Carry on Cabby* sequence, for example, would firstly function to momentarily de-familiarise the codes of the Western, to transgress the specific narrative syntagm involved. Secondly, it familiarises that transgression during the course of its repetitive articulation, its integration within the structure of *Carry on Cabby* itself, and the institutional role of the comedy genre. For that reason alone, as Eaton argues, judgements as to the 'progressiveness' of this or that comedy, or, indeed, of this or that joke or gag, abstracted from the narrative process and its institutional context, need to be made with care. But there is another reason too, the reason stemming from the relationship between

the joke, the way the joke works, and the role of the third person, or point, within its structure of address.

The point of what Freud terms 'the good joke' is that it makes sense:

If, by means of a word with two meanings or a word that is only slightly modified, I take a short cut from one circle of ideas to another, and if there is not at the same time a link between those circles of ideas which has a significant sense, then I shall have made a 'bad' joke . . . A 'good' joke, on the other hand, comes about when what children expect . . . proves correct and the similarity between the words is shown to be really accompanied by another, important, similarity in their sense.²²

It is at the point that the joke makes sense, indeed, that laughter itself occurs. And the nature of that sense marks the nature of the joke itself. If jokes (and gags, and other comic sequences dependent for their effect upon a 'play' with signs and their codification) consist of the disordering and reordering of the components and structures of the symbolic, then the 'political' status of those jokes depends upon the discourses thus re-arranged and re-composed, and the manner in which that re-arrangement makes its sense. It is clearly possible, for instance, for the process of re-arrangement to challenge the stereotypical relationships between the signs and meanings embedded in the discourses that circulate in society, and therefore to challenge the ideologies those discourses embody. Equally, and alternatively, it is possible for that process to renew those (socially established) relationships. Here the role and the mode of laughter of the third person should be examined more closely.

The third person, as we have seen, can be viewed as the site of the instance of Law and as the site of the instance of the symbolic. If the disordering and reordering process is such as to reiterate or renew socially established discourses, meanings, modes and structures of signification, then the laughter of the third person can be seen as resulting from the re-inscription of the Law, as resulting from the re-stabilisation of the subject. If, on the contrary, it is such as to disturb the symbolic order of the Law, then the mode of laughter is different, stemming not from the re-inscription of the Law and the re-stabilisation of the subject but instead from a re-arrangement of the symbolic such as to shatter the stability of both. For the latter to occur, however, precisely that logic, that rhythm of transgression and familiaris-

ation outlined by Mick Eaton would have, itself, to be transgressed. And for that to occur modes of discourse and signification other than those characteristic of mainstream novelistic narration would have to be employed for the context of the jokes and gags themselves. For the Law is not simply a matter of the ideological content of discourse, but of the orders of the articulation of meaning and sense themselves. The mode of the discursive inscription and narration of jokes and gags would have to take different forms, which themselves oppose the orders of discourse and language characteristic of the Law, if these jokes and gags are to achieve a re-ordering of the symbolic that is in any way radically effective.

A number of conclusions (and lines for further work) follow from this article and the one by Mick Eaton. Firstly, the kind of work begun by Claire Johnston and Paul Willemsen in relation to Frank Tashlin needs to be both continued and extended, though the contexts provided by narrative and by the mainstream institutions of film and television need to be borne in mind. For it is these contexts that determine the formal and ideological limits and possibilities of comedy, the nature of the audiences who read it, and the manner in which it is read. As such, comedy is really no different from other forms of cinema and television (despite the claims often made that it is somehow of itself more 'radical' and 'subversive'): it needs investigation from a perspective that is concerned with the contradictions in its forms and meanings as they relate to the institutions within which they circulate. As a corollary, the schema according to which 'social' comedy is to be distinguished from 'the comedy of language and form' needs to be abandoned, and attention turned to the discourses (necessarily social) upon which comedy works.

Following more closely from my own argument, attention needs to be turned to those texts which use the mechanisms of comedy to problematise the Law itself, and the narrative mode generally adopted to articulate its inscription. I am thinking here to some extent of films like Barnett's *The House on Trubnaya Square* and Medvedkin's *Happiness* (discussed in an earlier edition of *Screen*²³), both of which clearly attempt to use comedy to de-familiarise capitalist social relations; and also films like *Death by Hanging* and *Tout va Bien*, which ally a similar (Brechtian) strategy to a more radical problematisation of the conventions of narration and viewing adopted by mainstream cinema. Going further, attention needs to be turned to the comic mechanisms involved in films like Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* and Snow's *A*

23 Martin Walsh, 'The Political Joke in *Happiness*', *Screen*, vol 19 no 1, Spring 1978.

Casing Shelved, where laughter seems to be produced by particularly clear instances of a play with the codes of narration themselves, and is a function of evident shifts and re-arrangements across the axes of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic planes.

Finally attention needs to be (re) turned to Freud's paradigm, to the structure of smut and the dirty joke, and to the aspects of gender and sexuality so central to it. It is surely no accident that the crucial constituent elements in that paradigm can be found stated and restated, in almost literal form, in such moments and instances of comedy as Groucho Marx's relationship with the characters played by Margaret Dumont in the Marx Brothers films; as Woody Allen's narcissistic obsession with his own masculinity and the way in which that articulates both with his general concern with culture and cultural status (the Law) and with the various characters played by Diane Keaton within the films themselves; as the way in which the male protagonists in Jaglom's *Sitting Ducks* constantly joke about sexuality in front of female characters; and as the evidently neurotic obsessiveness with which women are attacked for their power and sexuality in the jokes and sketches of Les Dawson, Benny Hill and others. Certainly in discussing the sexual politics of joking and comedy, Freud's schema needs both to be borne in mind and elaborated in relation to subsequent discussions of signification, discourse and meaning.

Mick Eaton writes:

I think it is worth adding one final remark to Steve Neale's call for further elaboration of Freud's work on jokes. This relates to Freud's much later discussion on what he terms 'humour' in an essay of that title written in 1927.¹ Again, Freud's writing on this topic is by no means uncontradictory, for at the beginning of this short essay humour is virtually synonymous with what he had earlier called 'the comic', whereas by the end it is described as a 'contribution to the comic', as is the joke. The interesting point here, though, is in relation to the site from which these two 'contributions' come. As Neale points out, in the joke the laughter produced is a function of the listener's unconscious — but in humour it is seen to be something else entirely. 'Humour' to Freud seems to be a much less explosive phenomenon, rather it is an attitude, but an attitude which, like the joke, requires three separate sites in its circuit of signification. Again, like the joke, the third person (or third site) is relatively unimportant — a necessary sanction of

¹ Standard Edition,
vol XXII, p 159.

laughter. What is radically different in the structure of humour is that the first two sites are in no way conceptualised as persons, rather they are conceptualised as two identifiable 'positions' within the person 'who adopts the humorous attitude'. Humour can indeed 'take place in regard to a single person' — the listener is not really required at all.

The humorous attitude is rather seen as conferring an economy of effect in relation to the person in whom it is produced, and this economy is seen to hinge on the triumph of narcissism — 'the victorious' assertion of the ego's invulnerability' and also the triumph of the pleasure principle 'which is here able to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances'. Humour, then, has a 'grandeur', a capacity for 'elevation' which is lacking in the joke, although it is seen to share with it an aspect of 'liberation'.

Freud's explanation of this attitude and his description of its structural components within the 'person with a sense of humour' hinges on the idea that 'the subject is behaving . . . as an adult does towards a child when he recognises and smiles at the triviality of interests and sufferings which seem so great to it'. The 'humorist' behaves in relation to him or herself as both a child and an adult. Humour, then, is a product of that 'heir to the parental agency' — the super-ego, and the two 'sites' from which humour is produced in the 'humorist' are the ego and the super-ego. As Freud revises his earlier schema:

A joke is the contribution made to the comic by the unconscious. In just the same way, humour would be the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego.

Though I am still not sure what this means, and particularly what the force of the conditional is, it is clear that this third process, that of humour, is by no means reducible to those already outlined for jokes, or the comic, and it will certainly have its implications on the study of comic narrative. In particular, it may be a way of approaching those 'theories' of humour (often no more than journalistic asides) which see the 'function' of laughter as an 'ideological safety valve'. For Freud is saying that here the 'kind' super-ego carries the attitude 'Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous. It is nothing but a game for children — just worth making a jest about'.

One thing certainly emerges from these complexities and confusions: much more work remains to be done in attempting to apply these comic mechanisms to narrative forms.

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'DESERT VICTORY' AND THE PEOPLE'S WAR

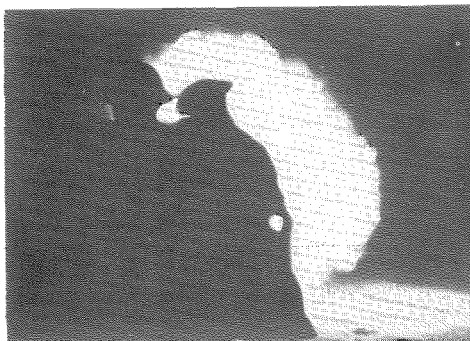
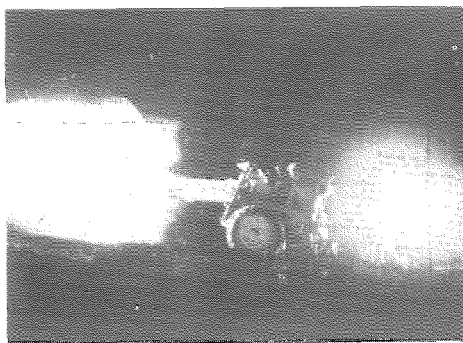
I

Desert Victory, the first feature length documentary produced by British forces film units during World War II, was released in March, 1943 to general critical and popular acclaim. The film deals with the campaign in Egypt and Libya from the Summer 1942 blockade at El Alamein which prevented Rommel's advance east in North Africa into Egypt, to the major battle between Allied and Axis forces which began in October, the rout of the Axis and the eighty-day western advance of the Allies. The victory at El Alamein is commonly regarded as a turning-point of World War II, following as it did a series of setbacks for the Allies: Winston Churchill described it as 'the end of the beginning'. The British coalition government led by Churchill had been subjected to a good deal of criticism about its conduct of the war, especially after the fall of Tobruk in June, 1942. The desert victory was instrumental in reversing the government's fortunes, and was probably crucial in making Churchill's position as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence secure for the remainder of the war.¹

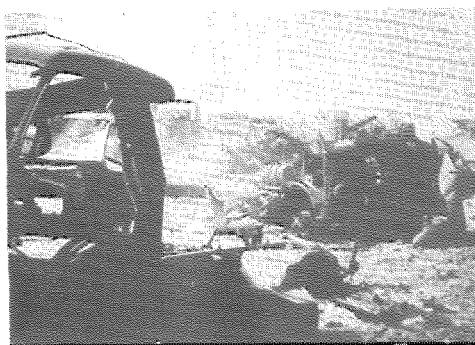
*Desert Victory*² is a compilation film, incorporating newsreel material, interviews, animated graphics, stock footage, and even some staged scenes, as well as a considerable amount of footage shot in combat. It is probably for its combat footage that the film is best remembered: contemporary writers' and reviewers' almost unanimous praises of the film are usually on the grounds both of the 'actuality' ('every inch of this picture is fact', wrote one journalist) and of the dramatic quality of the battle scenes. For these writers, the qualities of actuality and drama emerge as much from the information that seventeen of the twenty-six Army Film and Photograph Unit³ cameramen attached to the Eighth Army were either killed, wounded or captured in the performance of their duties, as from the 'realistic' qualities of the cinematic

1 Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, London, Panther, 1971; Corelli Barnett, *The Battle of El Alamein: Decision in the Desert*, London, Collier-Macmillan, 1964.

2 References to and quotations from *Desert Victory* in this article are taken from the print lodged in the Shepard Collection of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin. Figures in brackets which follow quotations from the film's commentary indicate the sequence from which the quotation is taken, and are included as a rough guide for readers wishing to refer to the film.



Desert Victory: The battle of El Alamein



Desert Victory: The advance to Tripoli

image itself. In this sense, *Desert Victory* was seen as evidencing a devotion to the production of representations of war hitherto matched only by the Russians: as Ernest Betts wrote in the *Daily Express*, 'we are catching up with the Russians in their front-line propaganda'.

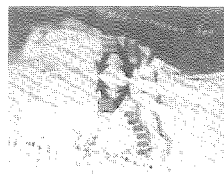
The film has a structure which inscribes narration, information and documentation in an image track bounded by a voice-over commentary. It tells the story of the desert campaign first of all by linking the Eighth Army's victory both with events in the immediate theatre of war — the disposition of the Allied front, Auchinleck's defensive victory of Summer 1942, the soldiers' fitness training, and so on — and with external activities necessary to the prosecution of the campaign, notably the operation of Allied supply lines and the production of armaments on the 'home front'. This explanatory prologue comprises more than one-third of the film's total running time. Although the part of the film dealing with the battle itself is only about half as long as the prologue, it contains those moments regarded by contemporary critics as the most dramatic of the film:

*The battle of El Alamein presents the greatest thrill and spectacle — to say nothing of admiration and wonder at the amazing organisation which made it possible.*⁴

The third major segment of the film traces the rout of Rommel's army and the advance of the Eighth Army westward to Tripoli. A brief coda shows the raising of the Union Jack in Tripoli and a marchpast of Allied troops and armour being inspected by Churchill. The 200,000 feet of film shot in North Africa were rushed to London, where editing took place during the conduct of the battle itself. The final version of the film was cut to the text of the commentary, and *Desert Victory* was first screened in London at the *Odeon*, Leicester Square, during the first week of March, 1943, only a few months after the conclusion of the campaign. The film was premiered in three West End cinemas, and given its general release throughout Britain on March 15th. It was released almost simultaneously in the USA (where it was a 'smash-hit' box-office success, and awarded an Oscar), Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, Persia, India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the Soviet Union, and in Britain and the USA at least, was distributed and exhibited through commercial circuits.

3 An account of the AFPU, including the production of *Desert Victory* appears in Ian Grant, *Camera-men at War*, Patrick Stephens, Cambridge, 1980.

4 *Today's Cinema*, 5th March 1943.



II

As a film, *Desert Victory* is a process of cinematic signification which constitutes the events of the North African desert campaign through its 'writing' of them. It occupies the intersection of two sets of discourses — relating on the one hand to documentary film and on the other to historical writing. In this article, I will attempt to trace the operation of these two sets of discourses as they constitute the specificity of *Desert Victory*. Since in some degree the focus of such an analysis is clearly the text itself, some of the questions which raise themselves most immediately about the film are textual ones. In treating the film as constituted in part by its mobilisation of discourses describable by the term 'documentary', I will necessarily consider its rhetoric — the specific modes of address which it inscribes. As this would suggest, I am interested in the question of the spectator-text relations constituting the film's address. But this is by no means the whole story. In the first place, a 'documentary' mode of address, as it operates in any particular text, is the product of its own history in the conventions and forms of the specific documentary tradition, if any, of which it is part. The textual operation of *Desert Victory* is only partially understood when considered separately from its place in an ongoing tradition of filmmaking (and indeed of other forms of expression). Aside from the question of its embeddedness within a context of documentary representations and institutions, there are further issues relevant in considering a film like *Desert Victory*: it is important also to look at the textual operation of the film as embedded within and formed by its moment of production. It is necessary, in other words, to historicise the question of textual address, to be aware of the ways in which the textual and contextual work together in the production of modes of address in a specific text. In approaching *Desert Victory* in such a way, I will outline the terms of an analysis which locates the film within its own moment of production while at the same time opening it up again, nearly forty years later, to a historically-contexted reading. This is not to attempt to recover any 'authentic experience' produced in viewing the film in 1943 so much as to suggest some ways in which the film — and by extension perhaps also other cinematic and non-cinematic 'documentary' expressions of the period — is constituted by a series of ideological operations pivoting on the spectator-text relationships which it inscribes, operations which, at a certain historical distance, begin to make themselves available for analysis.

I have argued elsewhere that documentary films may inscribe various forms of rhetoric, and have pointed in particular to a category of documentary film which may be termed 'observational', in that the self-presented guarantee of the 'veracity' of cinematic representation lies primarily in an image which sets itself up 'as visible 'evidence''. Bill Nichols is considering a rather different form when he discusses the documentary of direct address — the documentary with voice-over, a very familiar form.⁶ In this instance, sound in the form of a spoken commentary directed at the spectator is in varying degrees supported by the image track. In this case, the guarantee of veracity lies partly in an intratextual relationship — that between voice-over and image: in the classic documentary this is characterised by the latter 'illustrating' the former. The notion of the visible as evidence is still at work here, of course, but there is a shift in what it is to be taken as evidence *for*. It is as if the image were serving as evidence of the truth of the voice-over commentary, rather than directly as visible evidence of events 'outside' the bounds of the text. The relationship between image and voice-over, then, becomes to some degree hermetic: they are mutually reinforcing. However, it might be argued that it is the two in combination which offer themselves in relation to an 'outside' discourse — the referent, history, society, however it might be conceptualised. Such a text is thus ideologically marked if not as naturalistic, reflective of the 'outside', then as realistic in the classic sense, as abstracting some essential 'truth' from that outside.

This, however, is a very general statement. There are important distinctions to be made regarding the operation of textual address, even within the category of voice-over documentary, and it is important to try to come to grips with some of these distinctions in order to arrive at an analytical method which has potential for dealing with a specific film or group of films. It is necessary at this point to historicise analysis. Steve Neale argues, in the context of an analysis of film propaganda, that there are two main issues for consideration:

That of textual systems and modes of address . . . and that of the place of texts within the apparatuses involved in their production, distribution and consumption, and within the conjuncture as a whole.⁷

Neale's injunction may be extended beyond a specific considera-

5 Annette Kuhn, 'The Camera I: Observations on Documentary'. *Screen* vol 19 no 2, 1978.

6 Bill Nichols, 'Documentary Theory and Practice'. *Screen* vol 17 no 4, 1976/7.

7 Steve Neale, 'Propaganda'. *Screen* vol 18 no 3 1977, p 25.

tion of propaganda to a more general approach to the analysis of film texts inscribing certain modes of address. The question of analysing the textual operation of documentary film is not exhausted by considering its characteristic internal modes of address. Modes of address need to be considered in their historical specificity. There are two levels of what might be termed the 'historical': the immediate conditions of the production and consumption of texts, and the broader conjuncture. I want to argue that it is precisely such a strategy of considering texts as historically situated in these ways — of considering their *contexts* — that could be, and indeed should be, pursued in any critical work in the history of cinema. The question of documentary film as textual operation may in this way be linked with the larger questions of history of cinema and history in cinema.

Desert Victory is a documentary in which the spectator is directly addressed by a voice-over commentary. The voice-over is a narration/explanation whose relationship with the image track is usually such that sound dominates image. In the classic direct address documentary film, the image is bounded or enclosed by the terms set in the verbal discourse. The voice-over tends to limit the range of readings available from the image: it directs, in other words, the reading of the film. Since explicit point-of-view is rarely written into a voice-over, and to the extent that it bears the features of the distanced impersonal *histoire*, the spectator tends to be positioned as recipient of a unilateral address. The fixity of such an address may, in theory, be mitigated by the polysemic potential of the image track, but in the classic voice-over documentary, the latter tends to be anchored by the former. At first sight, *Desert Victory* seems to be exemplary of this classic documentary form. Nonetheless, there are moments in the film when the fixity of the image/voice-over relationship is somewhat shifted. These shifts take place largely within the modes of address inscribed by the voice-over, with movements between *discours* and *histoire* which form a pattern throughout the film.⁸ This idiosyncratic pattern of *discours/histoire* shifts in the voice-over of *Desert Victory* is precisely the point at which various historical contexts erupt within the text.

III

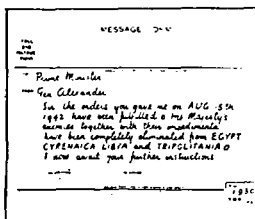
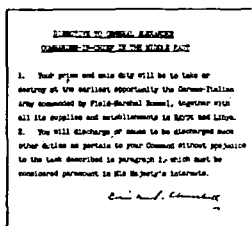
Its character as a direct address documentary of the classic type suggests that *Desert Victory* is readable exactly as a *document*. The impersonal features of the voice-over commentary — its avoidance of any overt subjectivity in its address, its treatment of

8 The concepts of *discours* and *histoire* refer to the implied source of enunciation in a film's address. *Histoire* is a distanced, impersonal form of enunciation, whereas *discours* inscribes person (eg 'I', 'you', 'we') as source or object of address. See Christian Metz, 'History/Discourse: Note on Two Voyeurisms', *Edinburgh Magazine* no 1, 1976.

events as already past and closed-off, its unitary position in relation to those events — confer upon it a kind of dominance. The voice-over is spoken from a position of mastery — a mastery not only of a discourse but also of the events treated in that discourse. On this level, the image track, as a compilation of footage from a variety of different sources, initially illustrates, and as a consequence provides a support for, the voice-over. The character of the image track as putting itself forward as to-be-seen gives it the status of evidence: but unlike the observational documentary, this status is not direct, but mediated by the address of the voice-over. If the image has the marks of 'actuality' it is because of the authority of the voice-over which it supports. Paradoxically perhaps, it is the spoken commentary which bears the more immediate relationship to the film's implied referent.

In its rhetoric, *Desert Victory* does two things at once. On the one hand, the voice-over comes from that position of mastery characteristic of an impersonal enunciation backed up by the visible 'evidence' provided by the image track. On the other hand, this same voice-over is marked by a series of displacements of the impersonal mode, such that the spectator is addressed in an uncharacteristically direct way — by being written into the discourse of the voice-over as participant in, as well as witness of, events narrated in the film. I shall call the latter a collective mode of address, and it will be discussed at some length below. It should be made clear that there is no suggestion here that this combination of different rhetorics in the address of one film means that *Desert Victory* is in any way 'fissured', or that its modes of address constitute a discourse marked by contradictions. Although a solely text-based analysis might suggest as much, it transpires on the contrary that the historical contexts of the film overdetermine this 'dual' address in such a way as actually to confer on it a unity. That is, the contexts are in themselves productive of readings over and above the effects of the film's textual operations, and in this case they serve more precisely to position the spectator.

Desert Victory's self-presentation as a document has both textual and contextual constituents, the operations of which are frequently difficult to disentangle in practice: they are by no means confined solely to the voice-over/image relationship. One aspect of the historical context is clearly foregrounded in the film — indeed it constitutes its very motivation. This is of course the broader conjuncture: World War II and within it the North African desert campaigns of 1940 to 1942. More specifically in



relation to this film, it should be remembered first of all that the Allies had secured the desert victory of the film's title only a few months before it was released, and secondly that the film was produced mainly for audiences in Allied countries, many of whom would see the film soon after its release, and therefore soon after the desert victory itself. These contextual features are marked within the text, particularly as appeals, frequently implicit, to the spectator's prior knowledge of the desert campaign and its outcome. This is most evident, of course, in the title itself, which discloses the endpoint of the film's trajectory, while at the same time proclaiming — certainly to an audience of 1943 — that what they will see and hear are the details of a victory about which they already know something. The dedications which appear as a rolling title at the beginning of the film underscore this. *Desert Victory* is dedicated to:

The men of the Eighth Army . . . who, on the 23rd October 1942, left the holes they had scratched for themselves in the rock and sand of the desert, and moved forward to destroy the myth of Rommel's invincibility . . . and to complete the liberation of the second Roman Empire overseas.

There follows a dedication

To the workers of Great Britain and the United States, . . . without whose efforts victory could not have been achieved.

Apart from its simple significance as reminder of the victory, the second dedication is important also as an acknowledgement of the outside sources of the Eighth Army's supplies. The reminders regarding the outcome of the campaign probably assume a greater significance the larger the historical distance between the desert campaign and the moment of actually viewing the film. The 1943 audience would probably scarcely have needed such a reminder, so that the dedications would operate as much to constitute the audience as participants in the desert victory as to tell them who won. But as far as appeals to prior knowledge are concerned, the contextual significance of explicit and implicit textual references to World War II and the desert campaign is of relevance to the question of the film's self-presentation as a document. Because the spectator is constructed as already 'knowing', the film's status as a record is rendered self-evident, something not even to be questioned. This point has implications for the operation of the

narrative structure and address of the text which are discussed below.

Contextual guarantees of *Desert Victory's* documentary status may be considered in relation to the immediate conditions of production and exhibition of the film, as well as to features of its broader conjuncture. Of particular relevance as far as spectator-text relations are concerned is the question of codes of film documentary. Audiences bring to their viewing varying degrees of knowledge of cinematic conventions which connote 'truth', 'actuality', and so on. And more specifically, it is important to note here the conjunction of the historical conditions of World War II with certain forms of expression. On this point, Stuart Hall has argued that in Britain during World War II

*the conditions were created which enabled a historical experience directly to inform a style.*⁹

Hall terms this the 'British documentary style', a set of signifiers cutting across journalism, photojournalism, cinema and social commentary, informed by a 'structure of feeling' constituted by social democracy and populism. The operation of such documentary forms of expression, argues Hall, was to 'democratise the subject'. One of the forerunners of these forms is the British documentary movement of the 1930s, whose influence on a number of levels is directly traceable in British film production undertaken during World War II. At the outbreak of war, the GPO Film Unit, along with many of its personnel, was subsumed to the Ministry of Information and in 1941 became the Crown Film Unit. This is significant to the extent that it marks documentary as at this conjuncture an officially-endorsed form of cinematic expression. This had implications for all film production — both commercial and non-commercial — in Britain during the war, symptomatic of which is the fact that commercial producers, with the sanction of the Ministry, incorporated documentary elements into many fiction films. *Millions Like Us* (Lauder/Gilliatt, 1943), for example, not only has a narrative motivated by a wartime theme (the mobilisation of women into engineering occupations) but also includes a number of sequences of actuality footage shot in factories. At the same time, documentary film increasingly incorporated conventions of fictional narrative, and the Crown Film Unit itself engaged successfully in the production of a number of 'docudramas', such as *Target for Tonight* (Watt, 1941) and *Western Approaches* (Jackson, 1944). This development of documentary

9 Stuart Hall, 'The Social Eye of *Picture Post*'. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* no 2, 1972, p 89.

forms of cinematic expression, and their merging with fictional forms, is significant in light of the fact that during World War II commercial distributors routinely handled the distribution and exhibition of films made outside the industry. *Desert Victory* is itself exemplary in this respect, in that it received theatrical distribution in Britain and other parts of the world. Thus in this instance elements of the context are textually constituted in such a way as further to strengthen the position of documentary forms of expression in wartime Britain.

Desert Victory was first publicly seen in a year which also saw the release of a number of other films now considered important in the history of British cinema: *We Live at Dawn* (Asquith), *Fires Were Started* (Jennings), *Silent Village* (Jennings), for example. By 1943, the institutional framework of British wartime film production, and also its characteristic forms of expression, were more-or-less firmly in place. To the audience of 1943, documentary codes in various contexts were perhaps routinely associated with representations of the current war. Aside from the internal operations of the text, the implications of its institutional conditions of existence would alone confer on *Desert Victory* the status of a document. That is to say, the contextual features of the immediate conditions of production, distribution and exhibition of the film constitute in themselves a limit to the range of meanings available from it. The film itself, moreover, actually refers back to those conditions, thus both further ensuring the limitation of polysemy while at the same time defining the precise character of its status as a document. This process may be seen at work in two announcements which appear, as written titles rather than as voice-over, at the beginning of the film:

In the making of this film, four British army cameramen were killed, seven were wounded, and six were captured by the enemy.

The scenes of Field Marshal Rommel and of Hitler were filmed by Germans — but were captured by the British in their rapid advance.

The announcement that people put their lives at risk in order to obtain combat footage for the film has several implications for the film's address. First of all it foregrounds a notion of the absolute priority, whatever the risk, of recording the events of war, and also attests to a sense of history in the making. And indeed almost all contemporary accounts and reviews mention the

cameramen who 'took' chances beyond the lot of the ordinary fighting man'.¹⁰ It is somewhat rare for a film's character as both process of signification and product of labour to be quite so prominently foregrounded. *Desert Victory*, marked as the product of valiant and death-defying effort, becomes a document not simply of a military campaign, but of the very act of producing a filmed record of that campaign. The record is on one level that of the struggle involved in producing a filmed document under circumstances which call for qualities of bravery and so on, so that the spectator is not only witness to the achievement of that production, but is implicated in the very acts of bravery necessary to it. The announcement also underscores the effectivity of the institutional determination of, and textual supports for, the film's documentary status, because such a dramatic statement testifies to the overriding significance of the actual moment of recording: that if they put their lives at risk, it is implied, film-makers must indeed have been in the thick of battle, so that the footage obtained by them must therefore be an authentic record of combat. The announcement provides, then, a contextual guarantee of the film's 'authenticity'. And the statement concerning the captured German footage would sustain this: representations of war become the spoils of war. To use footage captured from the enemy, and to announce the fact, is in itself to proclaim one's own side as victor. The use of German footage and the statement as to its origin together constitute both a contextual and a textual guarantee of a victory accomplished.

At this point it becomes more difficult to disentangle text from context in determining the ways in which *Desert Victory* presents itself as a document. The contextual constitution of implicit and explicit appeals to spectators' prior knowledge of the victory reverberates in the internal operation of the text, both in the film's narrative structure and in features of its voice-over address. The film is in some respects similar in structure to a flashback in classic narrative cinema, where events are constructed as leading to a foreknown closure. The classic narrative enigma-resolution structure, however, is here entirely evacuated by the context, and displaced by a series of textual operations which foreground information, demonstration and documentation, so that on this level the spectator is constructed as witness and participant in a set of 'authentic' events. Thus more than one-third of the film's total running time is devoted to a detailing of events leading up to the battle itself and to an analysis of strategy and tactics. The constitution of the spectator as in a state of knowledge as to the

outcome of the campaign is effected textually in the adoption of an anterior perfect tense in the voice-over during the film's prologue. In one early sequence, for example, the preparation of the Allied front is shown on the image track, with the voice-over:

The battle which approached in importance the Battle of Britain
was now at hand (5: my emphasis),

and in a sequence dealing with supply lines, over shots — clearly from captured footage — of a German merchant ship being unloaded, the comment:

For a considerable proportion of them [Rommel's supplies] there
was no future. (14: my emphasis).

The effect of this tense is to combine the voice-over's character as *histoire* — its narration, from a distanced position, of past and completed events ('was') — with the sense of presence and immediacy of a discursive enunciation ('now at hand', 'future'). The fact that the spectator is addressed as 'already knowing' and also implicitly as agreeing upon the significance of a particular series of events means that he or she is thereby also addressed as witness to the events themselves and to their cinematic articulation. This relationship of spectator and text constructs both, therefore, as participating in the production of a document. The textual and contextual guarantees of 'authenticity' thus work together — they are mutually reinforcing. *Desert Victory* presents itself as a document, then: specifically in its rhetorical implication of the spectator as in a state of prior knowledge concerning the events dealt with in the film, but also by its constitution of the spectator as witness of and participant in the events of the desert campaign.

IV

This documentary rhetoric is overdetermined by an address which constitutes spectators as a *collectivity*. As well as being addressed as occupying a position of knowledge, the spectator is placed in a certain position in relation both to that knowledge and to other spectators. This relation is characterised largely by an appeal to unity, most apparent in an address which renders the spectator as a member of a collectivity. This is evident in the repeated use of the first person plural in a voice-over which insists on an assimilation of one plurality, comprised effectively of isolated individuals

— the cinema audience — to a collectivity or community designated as 'we'. Since the film's voice-over speaks from and inscribes a position of unity, spectators are rhetorically contained by a united community, constituted as members of it, themselves potential enunciators of the 'we' of the voice-over. The spectator is thus bound into the film's discourse as the place of its enunciation, in particular by a voice-over pervaded by the first person plural:

We had lost 80,000 men and much booty (2)
Not another yard back were we going (5)
In the line, Rommel had come for us again (12)
Our Royal Navy and Fleet Air Arm were also busy (14)
And now our forces moved up (24)
Large groups of prisoners were in our hands (32)

(my emphasis).

One of the effects of this collective mode of address (particularly in this instance where the counterpart of the first person — the second person — is absent, so that there is no discursive 'you' in the voice-over) is in some measure to efface the source of its enunciation. The use of 'we' in the voice-over of *Desert Victory* implicates the spectator as participant in the film's address without at the same time fixing him or her as object of an address from an attributable source. A very broad notion of unity or community is produced in such an enunciation, one which permits a variety of spectators to identify themselves as constituents of 'we'. Because it is difficult to fix any specific source for the first person plural address, therefore, the rhetoric of the film makes available a range of readings: it is somewhat 'open'.

There are two ways in which the question of the source of *Desert Victory's* address might be considered. One approach would take as its point of departure certain features of the context, particularly the conditions of the film's production as a documentary form of expression. The other would look for potential referents of 'we' within the text itself, by examining the film's mobilisation of the first person plural. Both strategies shed some light upon the import — in *Desert Victory* in particular, but also in other contemporary representations — of a collective mode of address. In considering the conditions of production of *Desert Victory* it is important to recall that after 1941, all wartime film production was undertaken under the ultimate auspices of the Ministry of Information. Film was considered a crucial medium,

both for informing the public of current events and for the sustenance of morale, and it is clear that a film like *Desert Victory* was produced with both these propaganda objectives in view. Documentary film was for a variety of reasons, some of them discussed above, an influential representational vehicle for these objectives. It may be argued that documentary forms of expression emerge so prominently in this period largely because of the coincidence of a number of historical conditions, which have been summed up by the term 'the culture of the Home Front', characterised as a collective response to a common enemy, combined with mass civilian mobilisation and its political consequences¹¹ — the latter being seen broadly as an impulse towards a populist variant of social democracy. The 'social eye' implicit in wartime documentary forms of expression might then be understood as a specific socially/historically structured 'way of seeing': or in other words, that such expressions inscribe a certain range of historically-bounded readings or reader-text relationships.

The populism informing documentary representations and discourses of the period is a consequence of the fact that after the Battle of Britain in 1940, World War II was conducted in Britain very much as a 'People's War': a war, that is, affecting, involving and unifying all sectors of society. The associated ideology of 'national unity' in the face of a common enemy evidently informs discourses which inscribe collective modes of address: spectators are constructed exactly as participants in the struggle. If this is the case, it may be inferred that the addressees of the first person plural of the voice-over in *Desert Victory* are in fact the protagonists of the People's War — the People. The People is constructed by the collective mode of address as a group politically united by ties of nationhood, undivided by class — or for that matter gender or race — and having the same interests as the institutions responsible for the conduct of war, and indeed of representations of the war. The collective mode of address produces spectators both as participants in the People's War and as potential enunciators of 'we': in this ideological operation the source of address constitutes itself as identical to, or interchangeable with, its addressees — the People.

If its context suggests that both subject and object of the collective address of *Desert Victory* are ideologically constructed as the People, this is affirmed by the fact that the text, taken by itself, offers a range of potential enunciative sources: any specific referent for the first person plural of the voice-over, especially in the absence of any discursive distinction of 'we' and 'you', is

difficult to identify. Source of enunciation is thus to some extent effaced by the operation of the text, particularly because it appears to shift at different points in the film. Although there emerge several potential sources of enunciation within the text itself, I want to argue that taken in conjunction with the context, this openness simply provides sufficient enunciative space for a variety of social groups to insert themselves as potential enunciators of 'we'. One alternative which emerges, for instance, is the possibility that in enunciating 'we', the voice-over inscribes an authorial position, speaking for the individuals or institutions involved in producing the film. Although the context and content of statements made in the voice-over render this possibility, taken literally, somewhat unlikely in itself, it is perhaps worth mentioning to the degree that the film's voice may be considered an authorial one — that is to say, that the film inscribes, from a concrete authorial source, positions in relation to the war similar to those rhetorically constructed for the People. To this extent, the 'we' may inscribe authorship, but it is clear that, because in so doing it implicates the spectator in its enunciation, it is not thereby limited to an authorial position.

A further possibility to be considered is that 'we' might refer to the Allied troops involved in the desert campaign. Certain statements in the commentary might actually be read in this way: this is particularly the case in sequences dealing with the rout of Rommel's troops and the westward advance of the Allies, perhaps because at this point both voice-over and image construct representations of events whose agents are relatively clearly definable as a specific group, the Eighth Army. A sequence showing the capture of Italian troops has a voice-over combining the discursive first person plural with the passive mood:

Large groups of prisoners were in our hands (32),

which has the effect of distancing the source of address from the action, represented on the image track, of taking the prisoners. On the other hand, immediately following this is some captured footage of Rommel, with the voice-over:

We had imposed our will on him (33)

a more fully discursive variant of the first person plural, which carries over into similar sequences elsewhere in the film, for example:

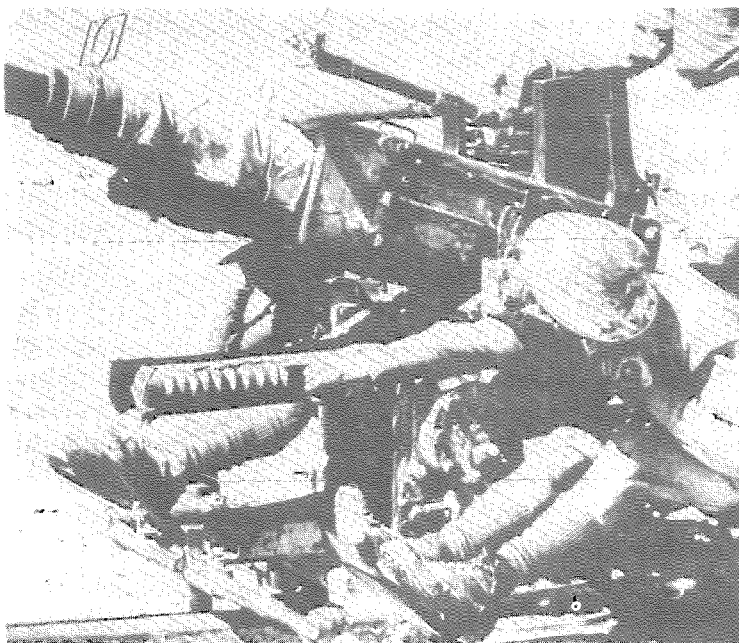
In the north, we took thousands of Germans (42).

Parts of the account of the Eighth Army's advance combine an address whose source is at times readable in the broad terms more typical of the collective mode of address, while at other points in any one sequence, it may shift to an apparently more specific enunciative source:

Eight days later we were fighting on the outskirts of Tripoli itself (43).

Such a statement, juxtaposed with an image track which 'illustrates' and verifies it with battle scenes, has at this point something of the nature of an account produced by subjects closely involved in the action represented, rather than of a discourse speaking for a collective spectator positioned as participant in the action.

Although there may be grounds for suggesting that address in *Desert Victory* may be located as originating from groups directly involved in the campaign, such a reading cannot be sustained throughout the film. The very fact that different referents may be identified for the 'we' of the voice-over serves to indicate how such an address produces openness in the text, a necessary comple-



ment of the discourse's effacement of its own source. *Desert Victory* is constituted by a collective mode of address whose enunciative source shifts from time to time. This in turn inscribes an equally unspecific object of address, producing a rhetoric which can incorporate a broad range of spectators. It might be assumed, following from this, that by virtue of the openness of its collective address, *Desert Victory* provides an enunciative space sufficiently unbounded for its addressees — the People — to be comprised of the forces and citizens of all the Allied nations, that the potential range of the film's address is broad enough to inscribe all the Allies as the People. I wish to argue that this is not in fact the case, because although *Desert Victory* does indeed bow to the other Allies in its enounced, in its enunciation it effectively excludes them as constituents of the People. The work of the enunciation is to constitute only the *British* as participants in the desert victory. Early in the film there appears a sequence dealing with Auchinleck's defensive victory in the first battle of El Alamein in the summer of 1942. Over six brief shots of soldiers (apparently British) repulsing an air attack, the voice-over states:

The British, Australians, Indians and South Africans were still there, fighting as doggedly as our infantry at Waterloo (6).

Within the statement itself, the explicit acknowledgement of the role of non-British soldiers in the Eighth Army is undercut by the address enunciating a 'we' which speaks on behalf of the British at Waterloo, for a moment in the history of Britain, thus at this point excluding all but the British People as enunciators. This is affirmed not only by the evident contradiction between the image and the enounced of the voice-over, but also by the fact that the very next sequence shows Churchill visiting the Eighth Army in the desert. This, the first sequence in which Churchill appears, opens with an uncharacteristic absence of voice-over, which is replaced on the sound track by music — the film's 'victory theme', no less. Taken within its context, this privileged moment of the film underscores the implications of the reference to Waterloo which immediately precedes it.

The construction of the People as the British is perhaps even more evident in sequences which deal in some detail with events outside the immediate theatre of war. There are two sequences in which the importance of the production of munitions and armour for the desert campaign are explained: one is set in



Britain, the other in the USA. A third sequence shows the news of the desert victory being announced in Britain. The British war production sequence is the longest of the three, being composed of 27 shots, most of them showing women working in engineering jobs:

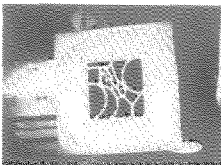
Battles swallow up weapons faster than you can build them . . . At home in Britain, the machinery of war poured from the factory . . . And British women worked alongside men (9: my emphasis).

The brief 'announcement' sequence — showing the reception of a radio announcement of victory — is significant for at least two reasons: first, it is set in Britain, and second the specific setting in which the news is received is a factory — a group work situation.



1

1 11' FADE in to Big Ben at 11 p.m. Chimes



2

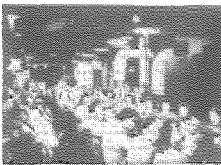
2 17' CU loudspeaker
PAN left and down to reveal
rows of women at work-
benches
end PAN women in LS

Pips. 'This is the BBC Home and Forces Programme. This is Bruce Belfrage. Here's some excellent news which has come during the past hour in the form of a communiqué from GHQ Cairo. It says — the Axis forces in the Western Desert, after twelve days and nights of ceaseless attacks by our land and air forces, are now in full retreat'.



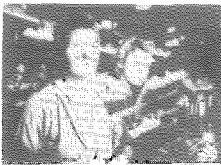
2.

3 1.5' MCU woman as she looks up. 'That'll show em!'
She speaks with a working-
class accent



2.

4 2' Reverse shot of 3. MCU an older woman 'There's plenty more where that came from!'



3



4

In relation to the rest of the film, this sequence is extraordinary in a number of respects. It neither incorporates, nor is it introduced by, any voice-over commentary, neither is there any extradiegetic music on the soundtrack. The sounds of the chimes of Big Ben, the radio announcement, and the women's comments are all diegetic, and moreover the exchange between the women constitutes one of only two points in the film at which diegetic sound is synchronous. While an earlier sequence, in which the importance of physical fitness for an army is explained in direct address to the camera by General Alexander, bears the marks of a documentary representation, the exchange between the women

has, on the other hand, a structure of a more characteristically fictional type: these two shots constitute the only shot-reverse-shot structure in the entire film. The exclusively diegetic nature of the sound in this sequence, the fictional structure of its last two shots, and the relatively lengthy pan with its controlled and fluid camera movement, all combine to mark it out as a dramatic privileged moment of the film. What the two sequences set in Britain have in common is that they both suggest, in different ways, the relationship between a campaign being waged in a distant country and the work of citizens, notably women, on the home front. On closer examination, they yield further meanings. Apart from the more-or-less explicit suggestion as to the interdependence of the North African and home fronts, there is an assumption as to where the home front actually is ('at home in Britain'), and moreover the People, constituted as a collectivity by the address of the voice-over, is represented on the image track as transcending both class and gender divisions. These two sequences suggest not only that the People are British, but that the entire British nation is the People. The reference to the production of Sherman tanks, however, makes a nod in the direction of American co-operation, while at the same time effecting a distance between that co-operation and the rhetorically-constructed protagonists of the desert victory, the People:

Although American material used at El Alamein was but a small proportion of the whole, it was vital to our success

(10: my emphasis).

This, like the earlier reference to Australian, Indian and South African troops, subverts its enounced through its enunciation of the first person plural, which constitutes 'we' as the People and the People as British, and so effectively excludes from its address Britain's allies, in this instance the USA.

Textual evidence suggests that the shifting character of the 'we' of the address of *Desert Victory* has the effect of opening up the text to the possibility of a wide variety of spectators being constituted as the People, while at the same time limiting this potentially diverse group to the British. It might be concluded from this that in addressing the British as participants, as an undivided nation, in the People's War, *Desert Victory* thereby constitutes the People as historical subjects implicated in the production of their own history as it intersects with that of World War II. And although the voice-over might be seen as thus

constituting spectators, there are points at which this operation is subverted by an address implicit in the image. Specifically, the contexted representations of three signifiers of 'Britishness' — Big Ben, the Union Jack and Churchill — operate in *Desert Victory* to place the People outside the terrain of history and upon that of myth.

Big Ben appears only once, as the first shot of the 'announcement' sequence. The image is static, is a relatively long take, and lacks the non-diegetic sound (voice-over or music) which pervades most of the film. It is not explained by voice-over commentary, nor does it 'illustrate' any verbal discourse, neither is a reading suggested by the emotional 'tone' of music. With its direct sound of the clock's chimes, the image stands alone, within its context foregrounding itself, a privileged moment. The image of Big Ben operates as a fixed cultural signifier of certain components of a stereotype of 'Britishness' — tradition, fortitude, and so on. The specificity of the representation of Big Ben in *Desert Victory* links with other signifiers in the film in such a way that the fixed connotations of 'Britishness' borne on its own by each are overdetermined by their parallel representation within the text. The Union Jack is perhaps a more powerful carrier of such connotations than Big Ben. It is the only flag apart from that of the Axis appearing in *Desert Victory*, and is seen four times without ever being explicitly referred to in the voice-over: two of these four appearances are clearly textually marked as privileged moments. The flag is first seen at a point early in the film: in the sequence depicting the first battle of El Alamein, there is a series of shots of combat action, the first of which shows a lookout in a car with a small Union Jack flying on its bonnet. The series of shots not only ends with the voice-over statement:

The line held (6),

but is immediately followed by the 'Waterloo' sequence discussed above. At this point the fixed connotations of the Union Jack are both associated with winning ('the line held'), and also incorporated with a suggestion as to who is responsible for this initial defensive victory (the British), a suggestion underscored by the implications of the address of the voice-over accompanying the following sequence. The other three appearances of the Union Jack occur towards the end of the film, again in contexts suggesting victoriousness. In a sequence dealing with the rout of Rommel's troops, a Union Jack is seen in one of the recaptured towns, as

Allied tanks roll through it, to the accompaniment on the sound track of music — the film's 'victory theme' once again. This association of the Union Jack — and, by the operation of its fixed connotations, 'Britishness' — with victory is reiterated at the remaining two moments at which the flag appears. In the film's coda, the surrender of Tripoli and the raising of the Union Jack on the image track is at one point juxtaposed on the sound track with the voice of Churchill himself.

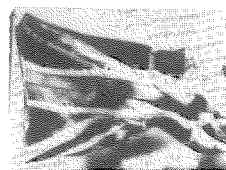
- | | | | |
|---|------|---|--|
| 1 | 3' | MLS 3 soldiers running along parapet holding flag | [Churchill] 'But I must tell you that the fame of the desert army has spread |
| 2 | 1.5' | MLS soldier unfurling flag | throughout the world'. |
| 3 | 7.5' | LS high angle on crowd. PAN up front of building to LS flag | Music rises to crescendo. 'Victory theme' starts. Applause, cheers. |



Churchill himself appears not in this sequence but in the next, inspecting a marchpast of troops and armour: the 'victory theme' continues throughout on the sound track. Churchill's only other appearance in the film is after the earlier 'Waterloo' sequence, which ends on a fade and the voice-over:

The immediate crisis was past [music begins] but anxiety remained (6).

In the fade to the following sequence — which begins with a shot of Churchill getting out of a car surrounded by soldiers — the music increases in volume and the 'victory theme' is heard for the first time. The voice-over does not resume until some way into the sequence. Like the image of Big Ben, that of Churchill also stands alone. At this point, the image of Churchill already signifies victory, and in this sense carries overtones similar to those of the Union Jack. The figures of Churchill and of the Union Jack, united as signifiers, are linked across the text with the image of Big Ben. In conjunction, these three fixed signifiers of 'Britishness' become textual signifiers of victoriousness. Each is foregrounded within the text, often by a-typical sound-image relationships, sometimes by virtue of their immediate context or by the characteristics of the image itself. The common features of these foregrounded signifiers produce a reading which unites them, and all of these connotations are condensed in the final shot of the film: the close-up of the unfurled Union Jack with the 'victory theme' on the soundtrack.



The ideological operations of documentary film tend to be extremely difficult to disentangle, if only because of the potential of the cinematic image in this case to present itself as 'natural' or 'authentic'. Historically specific codes and conventions of documentary work towards the production of textual assurances that documentary films constitute reproductions of 'real-world' referents in a way that the codes of classic fictional cinema do not: the distinction to be made in discussing the engagement of the spectator in documentary as opposed to fiction films is perhaps that between naturalism and realism. It is no coincidence that analyses whose aim is to dismantle the ideological operation of cinematic signifiers have focused almost exclusively on fiction films, on the classic Hollywood narrative in particular: the apparent naturalism of documentary makes it much less amenable to ideological analysis. This is not, however, to suggest that such an analysis is inappropriate to documentary film, but simply that it is difficult. The very fact that it is difficult indeed makes it that much more urgent to undertake.

Desert Victory appears to be a straightforward example of the classic type of direct address documentary. It is easy enough to see that it speaks from a particular position in relation to the North African desert campaign of World War II. Both text and context demonstrate that it 'comes from' the side of the Allies and speaks of and for the Allied victory in that campaign. Beyond this, and by its nature less easy to see, however, *Desert Victory* is structured by a complex series of ideological operations whose effect is to position spectators in a particular relationship to World War II, to each other, to nationhood, and finally to history. Such spectators are constituted by the film's rhetoric, its characteristic modes of address, which are inscribed largely, but not exclusively, by the voice-over commentary. The voice-over tends to work in conjunction with the image track in such a way as to subordinate image to sound, the apparent transparency of the cinematic image in this case validating the self-presented authority of the voice-over. Although the address of the voice-over of *Desert Victory* is the principal bearer of a rhetoric which positions spectators in relation both to the film itself and to the events of its surrounding conjuncture, there are points at which the rhetoric of the image may either work in a direction slightly different from that of the voice-over, producing a certain degree of openness in the text, or at which it may condense and foreground certain signifiers whose representation overdetermines the effects of the voice-over address.

It is important to note that the rhetoric of a film like *Desert Victory* is only partially understood by means of a purely text-based analysis. The position constructed for the spectator of the film is indeed formed by the ideological operations of the text, but the conditions of such textual operations are provided by features of their contexts — at various levels the representational traditions within which such documentary forms of expression are embedded, the immediate conditions of their production, distribution and exhibition, and the pertinent features of the broader conjuncture, in this instance World War II.

The spectator then is constituted in history, so that readings of the film are historically situated. The marks of the operations of both text and contexts structure *Desert Victory* as a document: the film presents itself as a record — of combat and of victory — by means of a series of guarantees of verisimilitude for the image. This self-presentation is no doubt a common feature of all documentary films, though clearly brought about by diverse means in different films. The specificity of *Desert Victory* lies in its articulation of a documentary self-presentation with a mode of address whose operation can stem only from, and be understood only in relation to, its broader conjuncture. This is a collective mode of address, in which the voice-over (and because of the typical relationship of voice-over and image, the film itself) speaks *for* the spectator, most notably through its mobilisation of the first person plural. The 'we' of the voice-over stands in for the spectator and provides interchangeable positions for subject and object of its address: the spectator can occupy the place of the voice-over enunciation and thus be positioned as subject as well as object of the film's address. Thus he or she, by being bound into the enunciation, is constituted as occupying the same position as the concrete source of the film's address, which in various ways remains sufficiently unspecific in the text to permit a wide — but not unlimited — range of spectators so to insert themselves. In this ideological operation, then, the spectator is positioned as witness, participant and supporter of the events of the desert campaign, and from the same place as that from which the film speaks.

As well as placing the spectator in this position, the first person plural of the voice-over's address also constitutes him or her as member of a group: 'we' in a community, united in the face of a common enemy. This is sustained and reinforced at various points both by the image track and the relationship between voice-over and image, in such a way that the collective mode of

address, in its historical context, works to constitute spectators as the People, protagonists of the People's War, of which the desert campaign is but one phase. In a further set of operations, the People is constituted not only as a community unmarked by divisions of class, gender or race, but also as a group united by ties of nationhood. Finally, in what is perhaps its most complex ideological operation, the rhetoric of *Desert Victory* effectively excludes from its addressees, the People, all the Allies apart from the British. The collective mode of address of *Desert Victory* then inscribes both a nationalist and a populist position in relation to the conduct of World War II. The People is the British nation. If the rhetoric of *Desert Victory* indeed operates to implicate the entire British nation as collectively participating in the desert campaign, a further ideological twist is added by the film's specific constitution of addressees both as victors in that campaign, and also by implication as future victors of World War II itself. This is brought about notably by contexted representations of a set of fixed signifiers of 'Britishness' — Big Ben, the Union Jack, and Churchill: these, by virtue of their fixity, overdetermine the film's rhetorical inference of a specific victory at a specific historical moment by a mythic implication of eternal victoriousness. At this point the subject/object of the film's address — the People — is effectively dehistoricised. While the voice-over might in some sense constitute the People as participating, as one undivided nation, in the production of its own history, the effect of the fixed signifiers of 'Britishness' would be to evacuate history from the text, replacing it with myth. To this extent, *Desert Victory* is an ideological constitution of the British People as an eternal unity, transcending the vicissitudes of history.

Desert Victory — Credits 1943 60 mins sound b/w

Production: Army Film and Photographic Unit and the Royal Air Force Film Production Unit.

Producer: Major David MacDonald

Direction and Supervising Editor: Capt Roy Boulting

Assistant Direction: Lt Patrick M Jenkins

Photography: Battle cameramen of the Army Film Unit attached to the Eighth Army

Commentary: J L Hodson

Editing: Sgt Richard Best, Sgt Frank Clarke

Sound: Capt D P Field

16mm Distribution: UK — Central Film Library, Government Buildings, Bromyard Avenue, London W3

VICTORY OF THE VOICE?

Annette Kuhn's analysis of *Desert Victory* in this issue concentrates on one of the most crucial ideological problems faced by British cinema in the Second World War. The problem is that of how to produce a successful address that can constitute all the potential British spectators of a British film as a collectivity.

Nowadays it is a natural gesture to speak from television (especially) using the first person plural: *Nationwide* announcers habitually constitute an identity of interest between themselves as spokespersons and their audience. Their use of 'we' as a term to submerge 'I' and to elide the specific place of the broadcasting medium (a corporate 'we') comes as second nature. This seems not to have been the case in 1939. Radio broadcasting conformed to a different ethic: it was the voice of authority, reassuring, correct, devoid of any regional accent, 'standard English'. One such voice does appear in *Desert Victory*, that of Bruce Belfrage, but a significant shift has taken place in the way that he is able to perform. He is *pleased* about the 'excellent news' from 'our forces' in a way that a British newsreader nowadays could be only about the birth of a Royal baby.

By 1943, then, a successful ideological shift had taken place. It is best

indicated by the use of 'us' in two war-time propaganda posters. The first, distributed at the outbreak of war was widely greeted (so Angus Calder claims) with cynicism as it pointed to a division of interests rather than an identity:

*Your Courage,
Your Cheerfulness,
Your Resolution,
Will Bring
Us Victory.*

The second, from later in the war, shows Churchill in hat and overcoat against a background of tanks and Spitfires; the legend, in quotation marks, is 'LET US GO FORWARD TOGETHER'. In cinema, the same distance is travelled. Jennings' *Spare Time* (1939) and *Desert Victory* could perhaps stand as examples of the shift in the use of 'we', from a pronoun used rarely and with very ambiguous results to a successful articulation of the British Nation as both actor and observer, enunciator and addressee.

What follows here are some speculations on this ideological shift, particularly in relation to cinema. There is nothing definitive about them, they are the provisional product of observation rather than of directed research, but they may help to provide further contextualisation for Annette Kuhn's acute analysis of *Desert Victory*.

It is difficult to identify a nationalist ideology in British cinema of the 1930s: national identity seems to have existed only as a negative definition ('we are not Americans, we do not behave as they do in Hollywood films'). The positive delineation of a national identity seems to have been missing, however much it might have been present in other media, especially the press. I suspect that British cinema could not construct a sense of national identity for and with its audience, and that it took some considerable time during the wartime 'emergency' to develop it. The reasons seem to lie in the peculiar problems of voice in British cinema. These became evident with the sudden and unwished-for introduction of sound to British films.

Sound posed a large number of problems for all the film industries into which it was introduced. To those industries whose narrative construction could integrate sound, there was still the problem of the cost of equipping both studios and theatres with equipment that had to come from either American or German sources. Everywhere, there was the problem of producing audible and comprehensible speech. Technical considerations (the range of microphones particularly) certainly played their part, but problems of comprehensibility of speech seem to have been crucial. The cinema into which sound recording was introduced was accustomed to consider its audience as a mass audience, an audience that potentially included all the world's urban population and its more developed rural sectors. Many aesthetic accommodations were made to realise this vision of communication/exploitation. The irruption of speech into this mass medium produced acute problems as speech is notoriously difficult to render comprehensible to the wide

variety of native speakers (particularly of English). A problem enough even for the American industry, the question of accent and voice is crucial for British representations. For the British, accent denotes both regional and class background. It is remarkable how fine an attention to accent is paid routinely in social encounters in Britain. This results from the amount of information about both class and geography that is conveyed in accents. It is also remarkable (as it is for any supposedly national language) the extent to which accents (let alone dialects) are incomprehensible to each other.

However, cinema was not the first medium addressing itself to a mass audience to encounter these problems. Radio had begun to negotiate them (especially in USA); theatre and music hall, with their national touring circuits, had already produced their own solution. This was directed towards comprehensibility at the cost of authenticity of accent. Neither regional nor class accents appeared in British theatre or on British radio. Drama (both radio and theatre) certainly had its representations of regional accents, but they were only for the purposes of comedy and/or condescension. Thus there was stage-cockney for the urban working class; 'mummerset' for the peasantry; one 'northern' accent for characters from the whole area beyond the Midlands; and a representation of 'Welsh', 'Irish' and 'Scots'. The influx of more authentic voices into music hall was severely compromised by the fact that much material was sung yet depended upon words for its effect. Even here, then, a tendency towards standardisation was at work, dictated by the supposed needs of a national audience.

Cinema's intensely pragmatic answer

was to adopt the forms current in theatre and in music hall. Actors could move between theatre and film, music hall and film, with no difficulty. There seems to have been no attempt to create a specific cinematic form of enunciation, a cinema acting that would demand, if not different actors, then certainly different skills from those of theatre. Hollywood, by its sheer physical distance from the heartland of American theatre in New York, quickly developed a distinctive style of acting. It could be argued that the perilous economic base of British cinema in the 1930s made such a development impossible, yet the problem of acting style does not seem to have been identified amongst all the multiple diagnoses of the problems of the British film industry. On the contrary, the wealth of West End theatrical talent was often put forward as a component of Britain's potential for film production. The theatrical and music hall solution to the problem of accents was adopted wholesale by British cinema throughout the 1930s.

This solution has numerous effects. The first is that a particular accent was adopted as defining 'speech': one particular accent was held to be that in which all normal exchanges will take place. Any deviation from this standard had to be justified in some way. This accent, stage standard English, was probably rather more declamatory than the standard English of radio announcers (but it is difficult to be certain without more evidence of recordings). In any event, it is not so much a classless accent (which can possibly be claimed for many American screen actors) as a class-bound accent. It is the accent of the metropolitan urban upper middle class, given an extra inflection towards clarity of enunciation (suppression of the drawl, etc). It is not the accent even of the

provincial *haute bourgeoisie*, who retained 71 certain features of their regional speech. This stage standard English became the accent for serious dramatic material, for light comedy, for newsreel commentaries, for documentary voice-overs. Regional accents entered only through their stage representations, in the form of comic characters like Gordon Harker, or in the separate low-budget genre of music hall films. These centred on strongly regional and class-specific performers like Gracie Fields, George Formby or Will Hay (all undergoing a cult revival today). Regional and class differences were deviations measured from the basis of stage standard English, and could only appear in the guise of minor and/or comic characterisations. In effect, a hierarchy of voice was instituted: stage standard English could speak facts and emotions, anything serious or of importance; the various representations of regional accents (themselves tempered by the need for universal intelligibility) could speak only that which revealed a limited understanding.

The hierarchy of voices was organised towards clarity rather than authenticity. Its effects were that cinematic representations were confirmed as separate from the world of the audience in a way that suited the narrative fiction film addressed to an audience conceived as a 'mass'. There were of course exceptions, Hitchcock's *Juno and the Paycock* (1930) for example, or *Love on the Dole* (1938), but these tend to demonstrate how difficult it is for British actors to construct coherent non-standard accents. The real difficulty with this regime of representation of speech, however, emerged from the documentary tendency. Some sections of this tendency seem to have been content to show everyday life as an exemplary activity, and therefore did not need authentic

72 voices which would have stressed the regional, class and even personal specificity of the activities shown. Other sections seem to have taken a militantly educational stance, addressing 'the people' as 'you' from a position of knowledge. In a film like *Housing Problems* (1935), an irruption of authentic East End speech has the textual function of providing evidence for the work of experts, planners and the British Commercial Gas Association. A third section of the tendency were closer to the aims of Mass Observation, and consequently placed a greater value on the specificities of ordinary life, attempting to create a notion of 'the people' as a unity composed of diverse elements. Stage standard English with its concomitant representations of regional and class speech presented the most acute problems for them. Jennings' *Spare Time* is perhaps an example of this tendency.

This last tendency within documentary work provided the most important basis within British film-making for the wartime construction of 'the people' as a 'we', both enunciator and addressee. Yet the whole conception of voice that operates in British cinema prevents this from happening. The enunciator speaks with a voice that corresponds with that of very few amongst the addressees, with a voice that is identified with a metropolitan 'ruling class' fraction. A new regime of representation of voice was needed to produce an acceptable and intelligible 'we' that could speak for the British nation, from the British nation. A period of experimentation followed. Fiction films began to work on the problem of social stratification in its depictions of the armed forces as comprising officers — authority — speaking stage standard English, and the men with various regional

intonations. Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* (1942) presents one conclusion of this trend: the bucolic characters of the village suddenly taken over by Germans represent honesty; it is the squire, played with impeccable standard English accent by Leslie Banks, who is the traitor.

Desert Victory represents a moment where stage standard English has been displaced by a newer form of accent and intonation. It is able to say 'we'; and the voice which announces this 'we' does not have immediate connotations of class position, regional location or simply ruling authority. The particular grain of the (anonymous) commentator's voice is crucial in this new ideological effect. It has a nasal quality which marks it out from the stage standard English. It does not correspond to any particular regional accent; instead it stands as a metonymic substitution for all regional accents, and for many class specific accents. It is a new creation, then, an early version of a 'classless' accent of the kind that is nowadays sought for television announcers.

For British cinema, the success of *Desert Victory* is important as it marks the successful cinematic articulation of a notion of the British people as a nation able to represent itself to itself as unified. This occurs at the same moment in cinema history as the identification by film critics of a new spirit of 'realism' in British cinema.¹ This realism was capable of producing representations of class and regional specificity (*It Always Rains on Sunday* (1948), *Millions Like Us* (1943), and even of class conflict. It also, as *Desert Victory* demonstrates, involves the successful invocation of nationhood and the production of a 'classless' voice.

1 See my 'Art, Culture and Quality — Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and the Seventies' *Screen* vol 19, no 3, 1978.

JANE WEINSTOCK

SIGMUND FREUD'S DORA?

Perhaps you are unfavourably prepossessed by our title, *Sigmund Freud's Dora*. After all, Freud did not always possess this creation; sometimes he, too, was prepossessed. Should we have called the film *Pajackowska, Weinstock, McCall, and Tyndall's Dora*? That would make the subtitle, *A Case of Mistaken Identity*, even more ambiguous. But I have no intention of discussing the differences within the collective. I cite our lack of identity only to suggest that in writing about *Sigmund Freud's Dora* I am in some way seeking to repossess that which I have already lost, my Dora. I stand, therefore, before this picture both as mother and as voyeur, and like Dora, I hold to both points of view.

To begin at a beginning, we return, already, to the title, *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, the first image of the film. Does Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie*, another possessed woman, come to mind? But even though Hitchcock does begin his film with a close-up of *Marnie's* rather large reticule, the cases are not analogous. It is true that *Marnie* is Hitchcock's fantasy and *Dora*, Freud's, but unlike *Marnie*, *Dora* walked out on Freud, thereby leaving him with only a fragment. And even more importantly, the alleged possessor here, Freud, is merely a character in a film which he most clearly

does not possess. If anything, he is dispossessed. So we begin with a lie, or at best, a miss-take.

The first section of the film is a single take. On the right hand side of the screen, a woman's larger than life lips appear in profile, and on the left, a chronology beginning with *Dora's* birth unfolds. This chronology would seem, at least initially, an alternative to the rather limited history presented by Freud. During *Dora's* first five years (the crucial ones, you know), Darwin dies, Nietzsche declares God is dead, Marx dies, the machine gun is invented, Engels writes on the family, Freud studies with Charcot, Africa is divided, and the Statue of Liberty is dedicated. Our history does not confine itself to the events of *Dora's* life. We seem to be attributing relevance to developments in science, religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and political theory, although our criteria of selection are not immediately apparent. Then, Freud's daughter is born, Pankhurst is organising, *Dora* wets her bed, and the Second International is formed. Certainly the juxtaposition of Anna Freud, Emmeline Pankhurst and *Dora* with the Second International is not sufficiently explained by the next fact — Emma Goldmann works in New York, although Goldmann

74 does qualify as both woman and Communist. But now Dora is having difficulty breathing. How is this related to Zetkin's struggle for abortion? And Dora's father is nursed by Frau K. Do we have an analogy with Kollantai? Was she nursing Lenin for shortness of breath in Russia? The chronology continues. In 1903 the telegraph is invented, in 1905 the first Russian Revolution proves a counter-revolution, and also in 1905, Dora's case is published, with counter transference strikingly present.

By now, I trust, I have made my point. Our revised *histoire*, although chronologically linear, is by no means straight. This is not to say that Saussure's work, Lumière's invention, Lenin's activities, and the other historical events cited are unimportant, but rather that these facts, disembodied as they are, cannot speak for themselves.

If the bare facts will not offer answers, one might turn to the lips for redress. Here, there is certainly an enunciator; she produces the enunciation, and her pronunciation is very clear. And, her precision is not limited to her delivery. While the chronology is dis-integrating on the left, the talking lips on the right are recounting a conversation with an unnamed man almost verbatim.

It appears then that we have simply effected a reversal. Instead of 'I said' or 'she said' as Freud said, she says 'I said' or 'he said'. Freud, the articulator of truth, the one who speaks for the other, is thus simply replaced by the one with the reticule. And if this is the case, the structure of domination remains the same — the woman is merely a mouth-piece.

You are rightly suspicious of my simple structural analysis. As any post-structuralist knows, you can't judge a film by its structure, especially if it is not a structural film. Moreover, if I were to confine myself to this reversal reading,

I would be ignoring the fact that this woman's position is critical of Freud's 'bourgeois pseudo-science' and that it is also, even literally, by no means clear. There is first the situation she claims to be describing. Was she with her analyst? He speaks like an analyst, but if the woman were on his couch, how would she know that he smiled? One reader suggests that the woman was with her lover,¹ but this reading seems no more verifiable than the former. In fact, it is not even certain that this story actually took place. It would not be unusual for a patient to fantasise a conversation with his or her analyst. Perhaps all that can be said is that there may have been a conversation between a man and a woman.

Beyond the uncertainty of the physical premises, this woman's theoretical premises pose further difficulties. Initially she seems more Althusserian than thou in her denunciation of psychoanalysis:²

You ignore the real practice of psychoanalysis, which now functions almost as an Ideological State Apparatus, and its intellectual history which has been a history of fashion. Its reconciliation and reappropriation to capitalist ideology and economy is not an accident. It is the natural place for a bourgeois pseudo-science.

1 E Ann Kaplan: 'Feminist Approaches to History, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema in Sigmund Freud's *Dora*', *Millenium Film Journal*, Fall/Winter 1980-81, pp 173-185.

2 It was Althusser who as early as 1964 wrote of the importance of Freud and Lacan, and who, while attempting to redefine 'science,' found himself, like Freud, unable to make the break. This is not to deny the valid criticisms of psychoanalysis, particularly of the *Ecole Freudienne*. But, objections to this particular institution would not seem to justify a total dismissal of psychoanalysis.

However, instead of pursuing the over-determining circumstances, the woman abandons the certainty of her ideological analysis for id logic:

He said: 'What is the relation between scientific discourse and the discourse of the Other?' I thought: 'He says this but what does he want?'

Once again, rather than 'she says this but what does she want' as Freud would have said, she merely reverses the pronouns. Finally, by the end of the story, the man and the woman seem to be in accord:

He said: 'We do not always possess our creations. Sometimes we are pre-possessed.' I said: 'That's what I was saying.'

She has returned, then, to Freud, or more specifically, to desire and to the symbolic which precedes that desire. Before Freud, the royal road to meaning was thought to be in plain view, and with the invention of photography, the 'objective' scientist could become an even better eye witness. Freud's teacher, Charcot, the realist that he was, could thus imagine a cosmophanic camera, which would eventually show him the logic of 'possession', or hysteria.³ Like his 20th century counterparts, who now look to film, Charcot failed to realise that the photographer, the viewer, and the apparatus itself are all prepossessed.

Thanks to Freud and semiology, we now know that the truth only seems to be in sight, and further that what we hear is not always what we get, that 'full speech' is really a matter of filler. But even Freud, while proposing a radical alternative to Charcot's scientific

photography, found himself prepossessed 75 by the tradition which preceded him. By the time of the Dora case, he had already understood that his patients' desire for him was merely a transference, that he was, in fact, a site for the working through of his analysand's previous relationships. His failure, of course, lay in his inability to acknowledge his own transferences, and it was this inability which allowed him to maintain his 'dry and direct' method.

If the lips seem to echo Freud with respect to this matter of prepossession, they differ decidedly on the question of method. They are neither dry (they are, in fact, very moist) nor direct (they face to the side, and their mode of address is an indirect one). Moreover, their tone, both aural and visual, would seem more appropriate to a seduction than a scientific explanation. And if this is a matter of seduction, these words cannot be taken at face value. A viewer so inclined might try to find a certainty in the words he or she hears — whether it be the certainty of an actual encounter between a man and a woman or of the woman's rejection of psychoanalysis —, but the certainty of the seduction would seem to cast a shadow of doubt.

We are, however, forgetting at least one thing. The story, here, is certainly tenuous, but it is not independent of the chronology to its left. While it may be true that the spectator cannot follow both at the same time, one is sufficient, because in each, '*histoire*' breaks down. In the chronology, an absurd history is constructed in order to reveal 'history' for what it is — a construction. And in the reported dialogue, the 'story' of traditional cinema falls apart; there can be no reverse shot. But the film does continue, and we eventually take the reverse shot, although with a difference.

If the spectator is displaced by the end

3 Also see Jacqueline Rose: 'Dora—fragment of an analysis', *m/f*, no 2, 1978, pp 5-21.

76 of Part 1, he or she might wish, whether consciously or unconsciously, to find repose in Part 2. The new address is, however, at best a construction site, and the onlookers here must also work.

The second section of the film begins with a Tylenol ad — a welcome relief both for a sore throat and for an already exhausted viewer. If Part 1 was too much to handle, this common advertisement serves as an instant fix; it offers the pleasure of recognition and as well, the comic effect produced by its inappropriate presence in a supposedly serious film about Dora.

But the pleasure is shortlived. A Super-8 silent film of a woman performing oral sex immediately follows the commercial, and the result is an unpleasant after-taste. If the ad is lacking in taste, one can at least laugh at it, but the pornography is no laughing matter. The spectator, still in the middle of a laugh, is suddenly caught in the act, laughing during a scene which seems to require a critical distance. It is as if the laugher, who presumably at least professes to a certain sympathy with feminism, finds himself or herself in the same responsive, and therefore complicit, position as the spectator at the 'real' pornographic film.

Having passed very quickly through two institutionally different but ideologically not so different popular forms, we take a third representation of female sexuality, Freud's, in order to repeat Part 1, although through a different optic. We return, then, to history and point of view, but our strategy, although still parodic, has now changed.

The body of Part 2, which takes the form of a narrative, is the story of a detective, who attempts to reconstruct a woman's past, and in case you don't already know the ending, our frustrated

detective, like the traditional historian who cannot find the missing piece, is eventually stumped.⁴ One might also say that this narrative is told from the detective's point of view, but while it is true that the characters do speak Freud's words, they only speak some of his words — the words we chose —, and these characters themselves are images, which we also chose. So Freud, the 'real man', is only our take, only 'a transference, . . . a new edition or facsimile of the tendencies and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis'.⁵

Our professed point of view is, however, not the only one, and it is not one — there are four of us, and not one is reducible to a single point of view, an identity. And even more importantly, a film is not a reflection of its film-makers; 'it is for you, too'.

So we begin our series of shot/reverse-shot dialogues with 'you'. The first shot, which once again radically changes the subject, is a fixed close-up of a modern day Freud. Unlike the lips in Part 1, he directly faces the camera, and by implication, the spectator. But direct address does not follow. Dora, not Freud, begins, and she speaks from an impossible position — she is both 'I' and 'she' at the same time: 'I was fourteen years old at the time, she said'. Moreover, since she refuses to specify a 'you', it is not clear at this point whether Dora is speaking to Freud, to the spectator, or to someone else. She goes on to describe Herr K's kiss, and when she finishes, Freud intervenes, speaking for himself in lip-sync and addressing the camera in

4 Freud was later to abandon his search for the real event and to content himself with his patients' fantasies.

5 Sigmund Freud: 'Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', Collier Books, 1963, p 138.

a manner appropriate to a documentary film about Freud's case study:

This was surely the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of 14, who had never before been approached, especially from Herr K, a man of prepossessing appearance.

Here, the viewer learns that Freud has heard Dora's words, but Dora's next speech would seem to indicate that Dora has not heard Freud's. Still unseen, she continues her story in both the first and third persons, and as before, she does not designate a 'you'. Finally, Freud addresses the camera/spectator once again, but this time:

In this scene your behaviour as a child was already entirely and completely hysterical.

The spectator is suddenly no longer the distant observer. Freud is clearly addressing Dora, and he is looking directly at the camera, at us. All of which is to put the spectator in the same position as Dora, the hysteric, who is both 'I' and 'she' at the same time. As 'I', she is the woman, the body she cannot escape, and as 'she', she is outside, the voyeur, Freud, us. And on another level, she is merely Freud's construction — we have only his representation. So if the viewer is Dora, who is only Freud's creation, he or she is merely a fantasy based upon an inaccessible reality.

If the spectator is, for a moment, an insubstantial hysteric, he or she is certain to solidify elsewhere in this dialogue, especially when Dora appears. But the moments of security are always temporary, for they are simply decoys, which allow a series of further displacements.

I have now come to a difficult moment. 77
I feel a certain desire to totalise, or to master, this object, *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, but unless I resist, this article will become an interminable analysis. So I will finish Part 2 by simply saying that three dialogues, each based on different variations of the shot/counter-shot structure, follow the first one, that each is preceded by an advertisement and a pornographic clip, and that each is concerned with a different aspect of the case. In other words, the work is for you, too.

If Parts 1 and 2 posit an itinerant spectator, who, like an uncooked egg, is all over the place, Part 3 suggests a certain direction, although not towards the omelette pan. This is not to deny Freud's claim that in order to make an omelette, it is necessary to break the eggs, but it is to remind Freud's most orthodox followers that broken eggs have other uses. For Dora was not the perfect *hommelette* — she didn't talk enough. In fact, she was often aphonic, and therefore, she wrote.

We come, then, to the postcards, or rather, to a mother reading postcards from her daughter, Dora. Here, the film ventures even further from Freud's case by making the 'unwelcome guest' the guest of honour. Dora's mother, dismissed by Freud as a 'psychotic housewife', is allowed to steal the scene. And with this transference, she is no longer wiping counters; she is speaking.

None of which is to solve the problem. A woman's speech is no less symptomatic than a man's, and even more importantly, with speech, her oppression cannot be separated from language, which may itself be phallogocentric. Thus, to give the mother the 'I' might be simply to make a man out of her. She says it herself:

How do psychoanalytic theories which

78 *presuppose language describe the place from which I am allowed to ask questions about the relation of my sexualities to representation? All theories which make language a given are phallogocentric. When my sexualities are represented, in theory, in film, in language, how does this define the position from which resistance to that representation is articulated?*

This mother, then, has no direct access to the words she pronounces. In reading Dora's postcards, she not only speaks for an other, but she also guarantees that that other, Dora, does not speak for herself. When the mother does speak her own words, and this occurs only once, she is doubly removed. Dora writes:

So it's not surprising when you tell me, 'I never made Dr Freud's acquaintance'.

The mother is finally given an 'I', but it is as a quotation, which is by definition, a re-presentation.

I have perhaps been too literal up to this point. I have claimed that 'the mother' is Dora's mother, and by implication, that Dora is an actual writing being. Yet, although the mother's image does remain roughly the same throughout Part 3, the postcards could not have the same return address. The early letters seem to be sent by a 19th century daughter, very much like Freud's Dora, and the later ones by a 1970s feminist, also named Dora. Moreover, the 19th century Dora's postcards of 20th century pornography set up a literal contradiction. The spectator, already uprooted by a shifting address, is now split between centuries, between Freud and us, between Freud's Dora and our Dora.

You may have noticed that until now I have watched my pronouns rather

carefully. I began with the admission that I, too, am in a hysterical malaise, that like Dora, and now, like the spectator, I cannot seem to stay in one place. But at the same time, I have gone out of my way to avoid ambiguity by attempting to differentiate between the analyst 'I' and the film-maker 'I', as if I could alternate between the two at will. My delusion of mastery has, however, now broken down, and I am suddenly faced with my own uncertain words, 'our Dora'. Is 'our' to refer to both film-makers and spectators, in which case Dora would become a sort of collective fantasy? Or is it confined to our collective, to the four of us? Or perhaps I should have stuck to my original 'my Dora', thereby retaining the specificity of my relation to her? The problem is, of course, one of differentiation, whether that be of every individual, either as viewer or as film-maker, or of the collective, the *auteurs*. There are, however, alternatives to individualism and *auteurism*, and throughout this paper, I have tried to make the spectator a site, a playground for multiple identifications. But with the pornography and with the mother-daughter correspondence, I find this genderless conception somewhat misplaced. For these sections seem to raise most acutely the possibility that we are not all *hommelettes*. We may not be 'female spectators', that is, either empirical viewers or the two-lipped *fillettes*, but nevertheless, we must begin to think 'Otherness' differently. And at this point, pre-Oedipal sexuality may be a place:

How can I differentiate between you, my mother, and The Mother, who is always absent? Unless I can somehow separate you from this symbolic Mother, it is difficult to see how it is that we share a position as women.

1898

Dora visits
Freud.

Herr K. pro-
positions Dora.
Dora slaps
Herr K. in the
face.



Sigmund Freud's Dora

FELICITY OPPE

EXHIBITING 'DORA'

Women depended so much on pride, pride in themselves, their husbands, their surroundings. They were seldom proud, it seemed to him, of the invisible. (Graham Greene: The Heart of the Matter).

The following considerations concerning the exhibition of *Sigmund Freud's Dora: a Case of Mistaken Identity*¹ are drawn from my experiences of screening the film at a number of different theatrical and educational venues. They cover a number of areas that were raised repeatedly during discussion of the film and should be further contextualised within the debates on the problems of a radical exhibition practice.

The film was made in New York and has a place within a history of American independent film production, a place which determines to some extent the terms of the film's address. It is structured around a number of theoretical texts (two in particular), which raise a question posed by John Caughie, 'At what point does the

imbrication of film theory and film-making become debilitating?'² Both these points suggest that the audience for *Dora* is to some extent necessarily limited to readers of Freudian theory and those who are familiar with a certain interventionist New York cinema. In its formal composition, the film addresses the place of psychoanalysis both in its historical representations and as part of the politics of feminism. *Dora* raises questions of the politics of exhibition for feminism which have been central to feminist debate on cinema, questions concerning the 'visibility' of women. What is and is not shown and *who* is looking?

Taken together, these points indicate that the film is part of a body of independent work that can present problems for an exhibition practice. In tracing the history of *Dora* as a production (or part of a production process) it becomes evident that this is not accidental. The film is the second to come from three of the film-makers and can be seen as a development of a film practice that takes its audience into account from the beginning of production. The document that

1 Claire Pajaczkowska, Jane Weinstock, Anthony McCall and Andrew Tyndall, 1979.

2 John Caughie, *Because I am King and Independent Cinema*, Screen vol 21 no 4.

accompanied the film *Argument*³ made prior to *Dora*) with the sub heading Sixteen Working Statements, Against the Number Theory, Artists as Businessman, is explicit about its aim to place the film within a small, specialised constituency of New York film-makers. The document is not available in this country so I will quote quite extensively from it:

In New York City, film-makers exist firmly within the artworld milieu, primarily in SoHo and TriBeCa. As such they function as an element in the ghettoisation of a bohemian sub-culture which has alienated artists from any concrete base other than that of their own professional community, a factory for the production and export of art. At the same time this ghetto has produced windfall profits for real estate interests in what was otherwise a declining area of downtown Manhattan. The city has wasted no time in exoticising this art community, to make it the aesthetic equivalent of Chinatown, where tourists can drink in the local colour manufactured at little expense by underpaid coolies . . . This economic position has forced independent film-makers into competition for income and access to audiences. The radical film-maker would reject this individualism and seek to create work and conduct a discourse collectively with other film-makers and political radicals.

The aim of *Argument* was to create a space within independent film practices in New York such that the very ghettoisation of film practitioners should be the basis of a political exhibition practice. Further, the document claims that the condition of

such an exhibition practice is the film-text itself, containing within it three ideological projects: the text should contain a social subject matter in a political context (as opposed to an expression of a supposedly individually derived vision), the text should also be explicit about its theoretical position and, thirdly, it should attempt to break down the trichotomy of artist/critic/audience. This practice, interestingly conceived of as a specifically regional practice, is not dissimilar to the project loosely described as 'integrated practice', ie a practice that takes into account diminishing cinema audiences and insists on trying to connect the often disparate spheres of production and consumption, and which has been articulated by certain sectors of the British independent movement. As a recent paper from the IFA⁴ has said:

Fundamental to this approach has been a conviction that an active film culture is not just about showing films to as large an audience as possible or in communicating theoretical ideas to as wide a range of people as possible, but that the social and political context for screening, talks, discussion etc might in itself be the most important determining factor of that work. This is a notion of a film culture that is devolved but not parochial, where experience gained locally can in turn influence national debate.

That *Argument* has never had public screenings in this country other than at

³ *Argument*, directed by A Tyndall and A McCall; research, production, animation by C Pajaczowska, 1978.

⁴ East Midlands, West Midlands & North-East IFA paper on exhibition, available from the IFA, 79 Wardour St, London W1.

82 the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1978, is less to do with parochialism of its address than the absence of an equivalent film-making community in Britain. The political concerns of *Argument* exceed the limits of its regional address — issues of patriarchy, images of masculinity, the political function of news magazines under corporate capitalism. However, its formal construction, the use of advertising, pornography, photo-journalism, publicity shots of male heroes simultaneous with both voice-over and written texts, tends to limit the film to questions of the American avant-garde's relationship to other signifying practices. The effect of this has been to limit the audience of the film, to confine it to a dialogue between film-makers.

In many ways *Dora* sets out to reverse this process by foregrounding its theoretical and political concerns through a use of much the same generic material — advertising, Super 8, pornographic footage.

The film is formally structured around three sections. The first, a close-up of deep red lips speaking of the history of psychoanalysis and its political ramifications whilst a series of dates and historical events appear written at the bottom of the screen. The second is sub-divided into four repeating sequences of a television advertisement, a pornographic clip and a shot-reverse-shot of Dora and Freud in dialogue. The final section shows Dora's mother reading postcards from Dora. The pictures on the cards show stills from previous sections of the film, paintings of the Madonna and photographs of male heroes: Elvis, Che, Christ. The film has been shown (often by the film-makers) in colleges, schools and clinics which practice psychoanalytic therapy.

There it has a particular intervention not dissimilar to the use of *Argument* amongst avant-garde film-makers in New York. The document that has accompanied the film when the film-makers have shown it states:

The psychoanalytic method itself is a process of reading the language and symptoms of the patient; Freud's case history is a reading of that reading, which we in turn read.

The film interprets Freud's text as a series of visual quotes. The dialogues between Freud and Dora are always scripted and are not taken directly from Freud's case history. These four dialogue sections shift in their spoken emphasis: Freud speaking in the first person singular ('I said, she said') followed by a conversational sequence, which in turn leads to a dialogue in which Freud and Dora constantly interrupt each other, ending with the same shot-reverse-shot structure but with the two protagonists now in different spaces (Freud standing outside in a windy New York location, with Dora placed in front of a bookcase). The final shot returns to the bookcase (which holds copies of *Screen*, *Das Kapital*, and the works of Freud) but Dora is not there. The dialogues and their relationship to advertising and pornography are quite clear with all three sections equated through particular foregrounding devices: the pornography image is grainy — you can hear the sound of a projector; the adverts are re-filmed from television; the shot-reverse-shots have miss-matching eye-lines. It remains a problem for some audiences in that there are many cryptic interpretations or readings of Freud's text, a web of intertextual references, that rely quite heavily on an audience's

engagement with theory. The movement of the film is an elucidation of Freud's text together with a reading of it. The visual quotes in the advertising and pornographic sequences provide us (the audience) with an equivalent of Freud's process in uncovering the sources of Dora's 'neurosis'. The first, an advert for liquid Tylenol, shows a woman who has difficulty in swallowing being cured by the medicament. This is followed by a close-up of a woman sucking a penis.

So we see that this excessively repulsive and perverted phantasy of sucking at a penis has the most innocent origin. It is a new version of what may be described as a pre-historic impression of a sucking at the mother's or nurse's breast. (Freud⁵).

Although this play between the visual and the textual cannot in itself be claimed as a 'neutral' elucidation of Freud, its central position within the film suggests that this is the function of this sequence. The film's address to psychoanalysis, its rereading of Freud, and its attempt to relocate the case in the present, is based on a series of contemporary rereadings of the Dora case and Freud's other writings on female sexuality.

One example, from the final sections of the film, should serve to illustrate this problem of cryptic intertextuality, which also signals the film's commitment to theoretical work, and, at one level, is what *Dora* is actually about! Jacqueline Rose's article '“Dora” — fragment of an analysis' (*m/f*, no 2, 1978) seems to have been used as a structuring text for parts of the final section of the film.

The naming of a fictional 'Jackie' who ironically takes an opposite point of view from that of the Rose text suggests the article as a pivotal text for the re-reading of the Dora case-history and the position of the film *Dora* in relation to feminist writing on psychoanalysis. The fictional Jackie, mentioned in a postcard to Dora's mother, is described as leaving a women's group that is reading the case history. She claims that Dora was a heroine for resisting Freud's analysis and that the group should do likewise. This dispute rests on Freud's early dismissal of Dora's mother from the case and recent feminist writing that attempts to re-locate the relationship between the girl child and her mother. Rose tackles the question by disputing the theories of Montrelay, Kristeva and Irigaray concerning the material bodily relationship between the girl child and its mother, in finding in the pre-Oedipal stage a resistance to the Oedipal structure itself, thereby placing this relationship outside of repression. Dora's resistance can then be seen as a resistance to herself as an object of exchange between her father and Herr K, a resistance to her insertion into the circuit of symbolic exchange (the Oedipus complex) thereby producing an hysterical *bodily* symptom (outside of language) — the sign of her continued attachment to her mother and desire for oral gratification. This analysis is rejected in the Rose article which claims that Freud never provided an adequate answer to the question 'What does the little girl require of her mother?' and further, that the answer is not to be formulated in terms of a theory of a specifically feminine discourse. The film seems to follow this reasoning. For instance, in the section in the film that raises the questions of the Dora case history for feminism, where Dora writes

5 Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories 1* — '“Dora” and “Little Hans”', Penguin Freud Library, 1977, p 86.

84 about the reading group, the postcards that her mother holds show the bookcase without Dora in front of it, followed by images of male heroes. A section of the Rose article that correspondingly deals with the same question states:

Nothing in Dora's position can be assimilated to an unproblematic concept of the feminine or to any simple notion of the body, since where desire is genital, it is charted across a masculine identification and where it is oral, it reveals itself as a query addressed to the category of sexuality itself.

The end of *Dora* poses a series of spoken questions serving to challenge the audience to take up the issues.

Dora, like most oppositional films, is not monolithic in its address. Besides questions of theory, it also raises questions of feminine psychoanalysis as a historical discourse. In screening the film it has been possible to raise these issues by placing the film in a programme that includes other films which might relate to some of *Dora's* other concerns. For instance, a screening of the film that included fetishistic representations of women contemporaneous with the *Dora* case history, such as *Ladies Ankle* (1901), *What the Curate Really Did* (1905) and Noël Burch's *Correction Please* (1979), could serve to relocate both *Dora* as a case history and the use of pornographic and advertising footage as present day representations.

Secondly, the film could be more firmly placed as part of an on-going (and often painful) debate as to what kinds of representations of women are acceptable at all. Within the context of campaigns calling for the censorship of particular representations of male violence against women, the control of

pornography, the production of different kinds of representations of women, the demand for a feminist cinema that takes on board questions of class work and race, the question of feminist exhibition and programming becomes urgent. The 'problem' of exhibition for feminism, its inherent exhibitionism, the problem of what is on show in representation, are areas often raised at screenings of *Dora*, for in this sense *Dora* is a very exhibitionist film. Besides pornography, it uses close-ups of red lipsticked lips, lush colour and a visual comment on Dora wearing or not wearing make-up. To contextualise this discussion one could, for instance, show this with the Australian film *Size 10* (Susan Lambert, Sarah Gibson, 1978) that examines questions of body image and the fashion industry, or with Jan Mathews film *Soho* (1980) that examines women's visibility and invisibility in relation to the kind of work available to women under patriarchal capitalism, or Chantal Akerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (1976).

Exhibition is becoming an increasingly important area of consideration for independent cinema. The practice of screening independent films in ninety-minute slots, showing one unconnected film after another is not really viable, as a recent screening at the National Film Theatre, in London, entitled *North and South of Watford* indicated. Despite the contextualising notes and the programmers' aim of specifying the diversity of regional film-making, the evening managed to present independent cinema as if its function was one of a series of quick advertisements for the state's work in grant-aid to the arts. As Steve Neale has argued⁶:

6 Steve Neale. 'Oppositional Exhibition — notes and problems,' *Screen*, vol 21 no 3, 1980.

In confronting an audience with a programme of films containing unusual combinations and juxtapositions of individual films, in thus asking that audience or public actively to select (and reject), and in setting a context for such selections, a process is set in motion which differs from that place in mainstream exhibition, in that decisions are made vis-à-vis a context which is articulated, stated and argued. The process is thus one in which differences and contradictions are stressed and highlighted and in which positions in relation to cinema are foregrounded and problematised.

Finally the development of a politics of exhibition could examine two important aspects of film culture; the status of the film text and the place of its screening. Part of the difficulty with 'theoretical' film is the institutional monopoly of educational establishments in assessing the coherence of a text and in the finance that ensures independent film screenings on the college circuit. Academic textual analysis and the introduction of independent film to college and schools are both extremely valuable but there is a

danger of mapping these practices wholesale onto theatrical and non-theatrical venues. Alternative practices need to be developed that are not recognisably 'educational' and yet provide an audience with a reason for taking cinema and radical film seriously. As Donzelot⁷ says, in assessing the political status of written texts, one reads a text not to discover its truth or even the interests it betrays, but

to identify the relation which it establishes between a knowledge which it produces and a power which it programmes, to evaluate its strategic functioning in a field of forces.

This 'strategic functioning' is now an important area of consideration for independent cinema. It should take into account the identified discourses available to an audience without applying sociological categories of supposed accessibility to particular sectors.

⁷ Jacques Donzelot, 'The Poverty of Political Culture' *Ideology + Consciousness*, no 5, Spring 1979.

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SHEILA WHITAKER

TRADITIONS OF INDEPENDENCE

It is significant that much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical: the recovery of discarded areas, or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations. But this in turn has little effect unless the lines to the present, in the actual process of the selective tradition, are clearly and actively traced. Otherwise any recovery can be simply residual or marginal.

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977

This book¹ will be read with anxiety and interest by those committed to independent film-making. One would expect — given the title 'Traditions of Independence' — that the terms 'tradition' and 'independence' would be defined, yet in neither of the two introductory sections (written by the co-editors Don Macpherson and Paul Willemen) is the term 'tradition' properly confronted. Don Macpherson

refers to the historic dominance granted to the work of Grierson and the documentary school of film-making, and sets out a schema of the alternative/oppositional film-making and exhibition which existed during the period 1925-39. He indicates the areas of activity which the book attempts to foreground and analyse, as part of the work to 'introduce different elements into the present so as to stress the selective and constructed nature of what we call the past.'

Paul Willemen states that 'as happens with any new movement, the IFA embarked on a search for its precursors and found them in the Thirties.'

Thus the book in effect collapses 'history' and 'tradition' into a single concept — it doesn't sufficiently separate out the historical from, in Williams' words, the 'lines to the present' of the 'selective tradition'.

Clearly tradition is a part and a function of history, and there can surely be no argument with the editors' contention that British independent film-making has been identified with Grierson and the documentary movement, with mainly reactionary effects down to the present

¹ *Traditions of Independence — British Cinema in the Thirties*, edited by Don Macpherson in collaboration with Paul Willemen, BFI 1980.

88 day. Obviously, too, one must agree with Annette Kuhn in her contribution in the book when she writes that:

the questions at issue here do not turn on the production of 'better' evidence for the purpose of closing gaps or filling in the details in a history whose orientation is already fixed. The point is rather to assemble new evidence as a means of displacing what we know as the documentary movement, indeed to subvert the category itself.

However, the failure to distinguish history from tradition is dangerous, because the specific areas covered can all too easily be regarded as tradition *per se*, rather than as an attempt to produce an alternative history out of which it is hoped will be produced an oppositional tradition. It may seem pedantic to suggest that the reader should be constantly alerted to the difference between them but, unfortunately, at no stage in the book is indicated the necessity for the alternative/oppositional history to undergo a further process of selection, transformation and elimination in order for it to produce a tradition which functions in the contemporary hegemony. The editors may perhaps have considered this (despite the title) to be outside their objectives, but in that case they should have made clear the self-imposed limitations of their work.

There is some attempt at engagement with the term 'independence', but unfortunately this tends to be in isolation from the 'lessons of history.' Thus to reconfirm the IFA definition and code of practice as 'oppositional practice involving an opposition to the strait-jacket imposed on film-making by the profit motive and the ideologies that

justify, legitimate or simply fail to engage with the capitalist organisations of this cultural sector', is to say everything and yet say nothing, and, more importantly, to talk about the profit motive in these terms sounds ominously like latter-day Grierson. Paul Willemsen quotes an IFA document, *Independent Film Making in the 70s*, adopted as policy in 1976:

What we are all averse to is artistic and political delimitation big capital invariably tends to impose. It imposes this control on two counts: the first is the short-term aim of making unchallenging films to attract large audiences immediately, thereby attracting large and swift profits. The second, closely connected, count is to contribute to the reproduction of this ideology that helps maintain the status quo — a status quo which of course includes the concentration of big capital in the same hands. Set against this ideology are the films of IFA members, many of whom see their work as aesthetically and politically innovative in form and content. Thus we have become independent in the sense that we are 'absent.' We are absent because what we have made present in our work has been systematically censored by the established forces that so far have stifled all development in British film-making. Our work together forms an aesthetic and political struggle in the field of cinema . . . We have to remain independent of the need to make profits in order to have real artistic independence.

The problem with such a statement is that, yes, we know that it is absolutely right, but where, in the context of the book's premises, does it get us? It certainly does not acknowledge the relativity of the term 'independence', a relativity which has been succinctly

identified by Sylvia Harvey.² It is disturbing to recognise a drift from political notions to that of 'artistic independence', a phrase with which Grierson himself would have identified. Clearly Grierson's involvement with state institutions was much closer and more constrained than anyone receiving production grants from state institutions today, since, as Annette Kuhn points out, 'the state as sponsor acted as producer rather than as patron'. Nevertheless if the principle of institutional ideology as a dominant force is accepted, then it can only be a question of degree rather than kind.

A further problem lies in the lack of a clear definition of the terms 'alternative' and 'oppositional'. To require a definition may seem pedantic, but nevertheless I maintain that the production of a book which, by default, collapses them into one term is to ignore their political and ideological significance. As Williams points out in *Marxism and Literature*:

The major theoretical problem, with immediate effect on methods of analysis, is to distinguish between alternative and oppositional initiatives and contributions which are made within or against a specific hegemony (which then sets certain limits to them or which can succeed in neutralising, changing or actually incorporating them) and other kinds of initiative and contribution which are irreducible to the terms of the original or the adaptive hegemony, and are in that sense independent. It can be persuasively argued that all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic: that the dominant

culture, so as to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture. 89

Such an awareness is particularly important at this time when, as mentioned, the state through institutional funding has a much more pronounced cultural, political and ideological dominance, with the result, as Williams again points out, that:

the area of effective penetration of the dominant order into the whole social and cultural process is thus now significantly greater. This in turn makes the problem of emergence especially acute, and narrows the gap between alternative and oppositional elements. The alternative, especially in areas that impinge on significant areas of the dominant, is often seen as oppositional and, by pressure, often converted into it.

These are precisely the lessons which emerge from the articles and original material in the book, but which are unfortunately submerged.

The book is divided into two parts. The first ('Part 1: The Thirties and the Seventies') is a collection of articles which range over a variety of issues and approaches. To some extent their eclectic nature militates against any coherent grasp of the issues, although the pioneering nature of the enterprise may account for this. Claire Johnston in her article, 'Independence and the Thirties — Ideologies in History: An Introduction', identifies certain elements very clearly. While her essay calls upon the work of Freud and Lacan in relation to memory, Foucault's work on history as a discursive institution of power, and Derrida's theory of logocentrism, as well as reference to the 'relative autonomy of the ideological in relation to the political and the

2 Sylvia Harvey, *Independent Cinema?* West Midlands Arts 1978.

90 economic' and to the way 'systems of representation operate their own levels of effectivity' it is restricted to questions of theory and classification and her interesting and valuable descriptive work on its institutions and formations, runs the danger of reducing the complexities of the period to an apparently closed and uncontradictory formation, foreclosing the possibility of theoretical elaboration. Further, her discussion of Freud and Foucault in relation to the writing of history in general is not only somewhat arbitrary, but also contradictory since she refers to Freud's contention that memory is:

a process of reconstitution rather than of mythical recovery. Freud posed the question of memory as a production rather than as a recovery of the past for the history of the subject . . . In his work on hysterical repression he developed a concept of Nachträglichkeit (deferred action) in which experiences and memory-traces in the past are revised at a later date to fit with fresh experiences, and are endowed not only with new meaning, but physical effectivity. Such a concept refuses a reduction of the subject's history to a linear determinism in which the past is seen to act directly on the present.

She appears to regard oral histories of the period as mythical recovery, recovery of the past 'mobilised as a "truth" to justify a particular aesthetic position', and continues to affirm that psychoanalysis 'points to the importance of memory as a reconstitution of the past for the history of the subject, posed by and for the political and cultural struggles of the present.' There are two problems here: firstly, either memory is re-constitution or it isn't: if it is, then such oral histories are also reconstitutions

and their labelling as 'mythical' is a *political* manoeuvre on the part of Claire Johnston since they are precisely involved in the operation Freud identified. In addition, if we accept her analysis of Foucault's notion of history as a discursive institution of power, and its consequent effect on 'different articulations of historical representations produced in and for the present which thus constitute a radical reformulation of the idea of memory in relation to history,' where does this leave contemporary writers, engaged in re-writing history? The implications for a book of this nature are considerable.

The danger of Claire Johnston's thesis is that it, too, mobilises history as the 'truth', and despite her own reservations about historical work which 'lays itself open to the production of new myths which ultimately obscure the "lessons of history"' precisely produces a history which entails new myths. Her insistence that in ideological analysis there is a 'structural coherence' to the various components which 'should be analysed in terms of the internal dynamic of ideological practices rather than as a simple reflection of the political and economic determinations' leads her to claim that 'the terms of the coherence of these determinations can be found in the dominance of literary ideology'. This has the function of not only demolishing theory itself as oppositional but it also releases activists from the necessity of recognising the interdependency of ideology with the political and economic. This permits political complicity to pose as alternative/oppositional, but and also tends towards the confirmation of ideology not simply as autonomous but also as without contradiction and invincible, granting it a mythical power which can all too easily

be harnessed to a fundamentally romantic notion of independent film-making.

Annette Kuhn's article 'British Documentary in the 1930's and Independence: Recontextualising a Film Movement' more clearly comes to grips with the issues. As a result, in discussing production and authorship she identifies the latter as more actively to do with the writing of *history* rather than the dominance of a literary ideology within independent film-making at the time, when its operation was displaced into 'notions of artistic freedom and individual creativity in defence of the [GPO] unit'. It is also not beyond the bounds of possibility, as her statement implies, that such an ideology, to the extent that it operated, was used against the institutional ideology in order to ensure the production and exhibition of more liberal texts than might otherwise have been possible, a possibility which Claire Johnston's analysis prohibits, but which one can argue was the strategy Grierson himself operated. Trevor Ryan's article, 'Film and Political Organisations in Britain 1929-39', like Annette Kuhn's is both factual and open, beginning the close work on the political film-making of the period.

This is admirably continued by Paul Marris in his contribution, 'Politics and "Independent" Film in the Decade of Defeat'. He says 'it is necessary to insist on the differentiation between sectors of production, of their terms and functions, as preparatory groundwork in developing more sharply the critical practices of cinema' as part of which the building of a political movement included the showing of political films, with the result that 'they helped constitute this movement and in turn their role was constituted by that task'. Socialists attempted 'to think

through their activity in the light of the overall class struggle and particularly in the battle to change the class control of state power.' Five years later, as the political crises of the 1930s became more sharply defined in terms of opposition to fascism and the threat of war, the aim had become the use of film 'for Peace and cultural progress, terms drained of all class contents'. It is here that Paul Marris' article is so effective, since his extensive political and economic factual and descriptive analysis of 'independence' is articulated *in relation* to ideology for, as he writes, 'in order to explain or argue politically within a given context of struggle, it is necessary to uncover the ideological and political forces that produce appearances and re-present them'.

The second section of the book is a collection of original materials, covering a variety of subjects: entitled 'Censorship and the Law', 'The Labour Movement and Oppositional Cinema', 'Avant-garde/Art Criticism' and 'Amateur Films', each with its editorial introductions and comment. This is an important collection, and is vital material for study.

As may be clear I have reservations about the book. These centre firstly on areas of theoretical over-determination and the ensuing foreclosure of elaboration and process which marked cultural study in the 1970s. (Most of the articles in the first section were written in that decade, and indeed are collected under the title 'The Thirties and the Seventies'.) This may be regarded by some as an over-reaction, but this work sets the tone for reading all else to come. Secondly, authors invoke basic concepts while evading definitions: 'tradition', 'alternative', and 'oppositional', (although 'independence' is to some extent confronted). As a

92 result both a grasp of the issues of the 1930s in relation to these concepts, and, importantly, of issues as they exist and need to be confronted today, is difficult to acquire. However, there is a great deal of value in the book and the line of thought which the conjunction of the articles prompt, leading as they do from an ideological reading of the period and the production

Claire Johnston writes:

I would like to reply to some of the points Sheila Whitaker raises in her review of work on the 1930s concerning 'independent' film practice in the present conjuncture, and my contribution in particular. It appears that fundamental assumptions of that work are open to misreadings and therefore require qualification.

My article was first presented as a paper at the History/Production/Memory Special Event at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1977 and remains substantially unchanged. This may account for its somewhat polemical mode of address and the tendency towards a reductionism in its analysis. It was intended as an intervention on two fronts: (a) from within film theory, calling for a need to move away from a notion of the subject posed in abstract and (often) theoreticist terms towards a notion of the subject in history/sociality to be developed through concrete analysis of specific historical conjunctures; (b) from within the politics of the Independent Film-makers' Association in posing the need for a theory of ideology and of analyses of the state and of institutions for 'independent' practice at the present time. Far from attempting

of history, through a sequence of more close readings of the political and economic, is, despite my reservations, productive. Certainly the book does throw into sharp relief very many apparent similarities between the 1930s and the 1980s, not least in the rise of fascism and reaction generally, combined with economic depression, and to that extent its appearance is both timely and valuable.

to mobilise history as a 'truth' or contributing to 'a fundamentally romantic notion of independent film-making', my intention was to attempt to displace and undermine certain kinds of historical work¹ which may pose themselves as 'radical' in that they attempt to provide a heritage for present struggles which has either been suppressed or distorted. However, they simply reveal the existence of past practices/struggles without providing any new framework for analysis. As Keith Tribe suggested in his opening paper at the Event:

The 'lessons of history' are not inscribed in the simple existence of a past; they are the product of the construction of a history which can be deployed in contemporary arguments.

The object of undertaking historical work of this kind, as I understand it, is to attempt to strengthen the movement of 'independent' film-making. It is fundamentally a political objective — aiming to give political demands a historical validity. Nevertheless, my

1 For example, Eva Orbanz, *Journey to a Legend and Back: The British Realist Film*, Berlin, 1977 and Bert Hogenkamp's work in the Dutch magazine *Skrein*.

argument would be that work on this history is not necessarily progressive per se. Too much historical work appears as its own guarantor — the historical tradition of oral history is a case in point. Far from being a production or reconstitution, oral histories usually serve as acts of revelation of the past. Effective memory for struggle, in my view, must operate as a function of the present and not of the past, and it was in this context that I raised Freud's work on memory, which poses the question of memory in quite a different light from that of a simple recovery of the past. As Freud demonstrated in *Studies in Hysteria*, memory traces are only reactivated once they have been cathected. He goes on to compare the organisation of memory to complicated archives which employ a variety of methods of classification: according to chronological order, according to links in chains of association and according to their degree of accessibility to consciousness. It is in this context that Foucault's radical reformulation of memory in relation to history — history as a discursive institution of power — seems to me to prove useful.

As to the vexed question of the 'mythical power' of ideological analysis, I would agree with Sheila Whitaker in so far as it can lead to an essentialism which ignores historical and social determinations altogether (as I stress in the conclusion to my article). Indeed, these debates have become an increasingly central element in Screen's project over the last two years and so perhaps need no further elaboration in this context. Nevertheless, I think that work on the ideological formation is a necessary prerequisite for political and economic analysis of the period. Indeed, through

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such an analysis it becomes possible to pose political questions for 'independent' film practice today. The 'independent' movement of the 1930s marked the beginning of a social practice of the cinema as we understand it today, namely a transformation of the relations of production, distribution and exhibition. However, despite this development, which at one level would seem to challenge bourgeois notions of artistic production, the analysis of discourses and practices reveals the extent to which literary ideology served as an over-determination on the movement, undercutting, in my view, its effectivity as a political movement. As I stressed earlier, the 'lessons of history' have to be the product of a construction of a history, which can be deployed in contemporary arguments; merely recording the presence of past struggles/practices is insufficient. If we apply such an analysis to 'independent' film practice today it is possible to discern a different modality of the same problem of literary ideology in the way in which notions of authorship, the artistic product, and so on, have been mobilised by funding institutions, for instance. It is through an analysis of the ideological instance that the links with the present can be found rather than the more superficial similarities. Sheila Whitaker outlines, those of the rise of fascism and economic depression. It seems to me more important to analyse and develop political strategies in relation to British cultural continuism (that rejuvenation of older institutions at the expense of newer ones, through their legitimisation and regulation). Clearly, much more work needs to be done, particularly in relation to specific films and campaigns.